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Severing at the End of the Line

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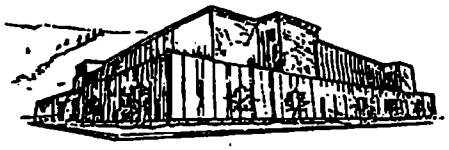
The University of Montana



A SEVERING AT THE END OF THE LINE

by

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He waited until nine, closing time, then locked the door, flipping the hanging sign around so it read open to him. His reflection peered, spectral and too old, over the sign's top, which swung lazily on its thin metal chain. The sun still hung over the mountains and side lit the stand of birches at the corner of Depot Street and Main. His shoes smeared the tile floor, still wet in places from Kevin's poor mopping job. Ian returned to the bar, where his cigar, one that he'd been saving for a long time, and for an occasion less solemn, released a stream of smoke into the bar's still air. The clang of the dishwasher and the steady hiss of water sounded from the kitchen, a steady background to Kevin's toneless singing. Ian sat at the bar and chewed on the cigar some more, puffing, trying to blow the smoke far from him as to discourage the heady buzz that had already made this final closing a more irritable and untenable event.

Kevin backed through the swinging doors, humming quietly, carrying a plastic rack filled with bar glasses. They rattled in unison as he set down the rack. He began hanging them in their respective slots above the bar.

"Is that a Cuban, Sir?" Kevin asked. Ian had told him to call him by his first name when he'd hired him a year earlier, had later tried for Mr. Waters, but Kevin was unflappable.

"No, just something I've had around for a while."

"Celebrating?"

"Something like that."

"Something like what?"

Ian took another pull off the cigar, eyed Kevin. He stood a good two inches taller than Ian with the lean shoulders of a boy destined for a life of overalls and mill work. When Ian hired him, he'd made some vague promises about moving him onto the hot line, teaching him to cook; a year later he'd still not managed to train the boy to properly clean the bathroom.

"What are you going to do now?" Ian asked.

"I figured I'd mop out the kitchen, there's a few dishes left."

"I mean now that we're closing."

"Oh." He paused, as though hearing the news for the first time. "I been talking to a recruiter. Army. Says they'll pay for college maybe."

"You want to go to college?"

Kevin pulled a high-ball glass from the rack, by the stem as Ian had taught him. "I'm not sure what I want," he said.

Ian nodded, slowly. "See that framed bill behind you?" he asked. "Take that down for me, would you?"

Kevin pulled the small frame from the wall and handed it across the bar. Ian pulled the backing free and removed the dollar bill. It was old and thin, spent to a true fabric state. He turned the backing over and read, *First dollar earned – The Black Brimmer and Buckshot Lounge – May 6, 2003.* His own handwriting.

"Putting it on the ponies?" Kevin had finished emptying the rack and it now hung at his side.

"I'm going to buy us a drink. You drink?"

"I'm on the clock."

"Then it had better be a training exercise. Never did get you cooking, so maybe I can send you out of here with a little bar brains. What do you drink?"

"Tequila, mostly."

"Pull it down then, and grab a bottle of Maker's Mark while you're at it. Ever had a tequila libre?"

Kevin shook his head. Ian showed him the mixture, explained how to measure a drink by pulls. Kevin watched, his head nodding in earnest absence.

"Me, I drink Old Fashioneds. You go into any bar north of Boston and ask for an Old Fahioned and you'll likely have to tell the indigent behind the bar what you mean. A travesty. My father drank them and to hear him tell it was the only thing bartenders used to make."

"Maybe that's why they call them Old Fashioneds."

Ian chuckled. It was nice when they surprised you. "Now pay attention," he said, and showed Kevin how to mash the orange rind with the sugar, add the bitters and then the bourbon, filling it to just below the rocks glass rim. "There you go, barkeep," he said when he was done, and slid the weathered bill across the counter to Kevin. "Hit the cash button on the register, toss this in."

Kevin did and the receipt printer ticked out a few inconsequential lines.

"Register's empty," Kevin said.

"Just toss it in. Let the collectors have it." In the bar mirror Ian could see Depot Street behind him, through the atrium windows. There two young boys dragged a raggedy dog along by a leash. Ian raised his glass and waited for Kevin to do the same. "To not being sure what you want," he said, and touched the glasses so lightly that it made almost no sound at all.

Kevin took a sip, nodded genuine approval, and after a moment said, "I'm sorry they did you like they did," to which Ian said nothing, but nodded his reply and held up a hand to ward off further apologies.

They drank, Ian slowly and Kevin downing his in three pulls before retiring to the kitchen where he worked silently now. Ian sat at the bar and let his cigar burn out in the ashtray. When Kevin announced through a thin gap in the doors that he was done, Ian waved him good-bye, waited a few minutes until he was sure the boy had gone, and then left the cigar and the last few sips of his Old Fashioned on the darkened bar, the libations of a ghost.

He drove the three miles home in his old Subaru, through the intervale with its cylindrical bales of hay, up our of the basin to where the maples and birches crowded

the twin-lane blacktop, their leaves turned early this year, already vibrant in reds and yellows, the rare and stunted green of an underdeveloped tree stark in contrast. He passed through the new covered bridge, constructed after the old one burned suspiciously two winters ago, the winter after he'd moved here with Annie and Warren. The Subaru's compromised exhaust was deafening in the bridge's echo chamber. He emerged to the village with its white capes and colonials standing a respectful distance from the road, shutters and trim painted black and gray, trimmed hedges circling the perimeter. He rounded the town common and headed east, slowed as he turned off the paved road onto East Rumney.

His thoughts were focused on Kevin as he drove the rutted dirt road, veering to avoid the worse pot-holes by habit. He tried to imagine the boy in an Army uniform, pitied the drill instructor who would have to show the youth how to use a gun, a grenade. He tried to picture Kevin rushing forward in infantry assault, gun chested, a look of fierce determination and bloodlust on his face, but could only manage an image of the boy in a white apron, standing in the middle of some desert, armed with a fistful of forks.

There was a truck at the top of his drive; he could see from a hundred feet downhill and he slowed, coming to a stop by the pond. He recognized the white F-350, its rusted spots like bullet holes peppered across the raised tailgate. It had remained parked at the Brimmer parking lot past closing more than once, its driver having found his way elsewhere with others; still, he was unsure whose car it was exactly and knew only that it belonged to one of the local desperadoes, the townie crew that had plagued his bar since its opening, the rowdy rednecks who were, in his

opinion, responsible for its closing now. Ian pulled up the drive and parked next to the truck, he stood and peered through the window, expecting to find someone sitting inside, but finding it empty. He reached under the Subaru's seat and freed the tire iron, slid it down the back of his pants and pulled his shirt down to cover.

His house had been built on a slope and so the driveway entrance led to the basement. Ian passed this door and rounded the side of the house, climbed the wooden steps to the deck and the proper front door. Nobody still. It could be hunters, he thought, scouting early in the season, but still he opened the door quietly, one hand inched back on his belt so that his thumb rested against the cool iron. He shut the door behind him and surveyed the room. Everything was as he'd left it and the room was dark save for the dim kitchen lights above the island, which stayed on always. He ran a finger across the leather of his lazy boy as he passed into the main bedroom. On the way back he peered into Warren's room, which he had now converted to a guest room, though there were no guests and the conversion involved a quick cleaning and removal of posters. Back in the living room, satisfied that the truck belonged to some eager hunter, Ian set to making another drink. He had just dropped the orange rind into the glass when a toilet flushed from beyond the kitchen. He set the drink down.

A man rounded the corner, still buckling his belt, walking bowlegged in tight jeans that slung low on a skeletal frame. He wore a t-shirt marred with paint and cement. His eyes, set fish-like, far back on either side of a nose wide enough to have been flattened many times over, met Ian's with a look that mixed mischief with glee.

"Pretty crapper," he said, finishing with his belt and pushing a greasy strand of yellow hair back behind his ear.

"What are you doing here, Rusty?" Ian asked.

"Rest stop. Was passing through town and thought, I'd like to stop in at Ian's place and have a drink. Then I remembered you's closed up and this seemed like the next best thing in a line of no good things."

"Time to go," Ian said, moving towards the door as Rusty took a seat on one of the stools at the island that divided the kitchen from the living room. Two of the legs of his stool rested on the linoleum, two on the carpet. He rocked back and forth slightly.

"I don't know where you hail from, Ian" Rusty said, tapping long fingernails against the countertop, "but it's considerably inappropriate – rude even – to deny a weary traveler some...hospitality." His mocking attempt at gentile language, the grinning tilt of his head, even the way he spoke Ian's name, all seemed aim to point out the gulf that stood between the two men: Rusty came from a place where men were named after things or grandfathers; Ian, Warren, these were the unmoored names of privilege.

"Hospitality needs only be extended to guests, not trespassers. If this is about Lester..."

"No you don't." Rusty sat forward so he was nearly standing. "Don't you so much as say his name."

"If it is, I'm sorry for your loss and I've paid for what part I had. It was an accident and it's over now." He held his palms up before him and, as he finished, brought them together in a regrettably pleading gesture.

"Ain't no accidents and nothing's over," Rusty said, settling back again, forcing his smile to return. "And I ain't here about him. It's your kin this time."

Ian took a step forward, the carpet feeling spongy beneath his feet. "Warren?"

"Warren."

Ian breathed deep and walked back to the bar where his drink remained, untended. "What business you have with Warren is yours and his. I don't know where he is."

"And wouldn't tell me if you did."

Ian looked up from his glass, working the pestle. "No, I wouldn't."

"Didn't figure. That's not why I'm here anyways. I'm here, drinkless and offended, as a favor to you, from one man who loves his family to another. Your boy is into my pa for a chunk and we ain't seen him in a while, which don't mean we can't find him, but just that we ain't bothered looking yet. Now I know that if I had had the chance, the night of Lester's," he paused, pushing his tongue around in his mouth, "accident, well I would have done whatever I could to prevent it."

Ian had turned the peel to paste and his wrist hurt. His hand shook as he forewent the bitters and added whiskey straight, put it back with one swallow.

"How much?"

"Don't know. My pa keeps the figures. I wasn't ever much for math. He's waiting on us, though, if you want to take care of this before any more accidents happen."

Ian steadied himself against the bar. The polished wood was cool and he wanted badly to get on his knees and rest his forehead against it, cool the burning sweat. "All right," he said.

"Super!" Rusty jumped to his feet. "Pour us a couple for the road and, oh, you can leave your tire iron. I got one in the truck."

Half an hour later, after they'd driven back through town and out past the mill, climbed the reservoir road that ran between the Baker River and the tall, granitic face of the Rattlesnake cliffs studded with the bright shirts of Massachussettes rock climbers, after they'd mounted the shoulder and dropped into the cramped valley below, a valley littered with single-wides, crippled swing sets and yard trees cleaved ankle-high for cordwood, after they'd left even those ramshackle, Typar shacks and barreled at Rusty's maniacal speed into the low-hanging tree cover, they arrived at Chins's place, skidding, Rusty sounding a few quick bleats on the horn to announce their arrival. Ian loosened his grip on the door handle, stepped down.

The yard was clear-cut and wide, stumps still standing like intermittent traps, one to trip, its brother to impale. It's muddy expanse sloped gently to the hill's crest, where a shack, blackened with soot and oil, and a teal trailer stood on opposite sides of the drive, connected by an orange length of extension chord. Fifty gallon drums congregated by the shack's open and leaning el and, as they approached, Ian saw they

were full of wood, water, oil, all forming a thick soup the color of thinned blood, just dark enough to obscure the bottom. Behind the shack a rough-cut fence shook at the weight of some unseen animal and from there came the squeal of pigs, and their smell, thick and fecund. At the yard's edge a half dozen trucks held a silent vigil to automotive history, their glassless or pitted windshields watching the still of the lawn, the two men advancing on the shack. Ian's steady trembling had built to a buzz. The mud room's plywood floor jittered beneath him as he entered a few steps behind Rusty.

The shack's interior was larger than it appeared from the outside, one cavernous room swathed in ruddish light from a chandelier hung so low that the patchy wire job was visible at eye level. Ian recognized Chins in his recliner, enormous and block-headed, his gray flattop, the flannel shirt tucked into Dickie's gone orange with use. Another man, one less familiar to Ian, sat on a stool in the corner, shaded so that the light only glinted from the highlights in the red hair that covered his head. He watched Ian without moving his head, so that the eyes beneath their auburn brows had to press hard to the side. Chins gestured to a chair across from him. Ian checked for any other exits; there were none. He sat.

"Rusty filled you in and so I won't waste any more time," he spoke very quietly, as though exhausted. "Your son owes me money."

"I don't know what Warren was involved in," Ian began, but Chins interrupted.

"Is involved in."

"I don't know what he's involved in, or what you are – "

The man in the corner laughed without humor, a sharp outburst.

"What does this have to do with me?" Ian finished.

Chins rose, walked in back of his recliner. "It's a matter of unfinished business." He took a pair of glasses from a table strewn with dishes and greasy, non-descript pieces of machinery. He put them on and found a piece of paper, which he inspected and then handed to Ian. The paper felt slick between his moist fingertips. It bore two columns, one with a name and the other with a number. The list extended the length of the page and, Ian imagined, there was more elsewhere. Standing over him, Chins tapped the center of the page with the earpiece of his glasses. It was hard for Ian to read with Chins's bulk blocking the dim light, but he managed: Warren Waters, $3,000. He let out a long breath and when he drew it back in he smelled Chins's odor of old bacon.

"Like I said, I don't see what this has to do with me."

"That piece of shit's your blood," the red-headed man said, still facing forward, eyes still askance.

"Enough, Butchie," Chins said, then to Ian, "Why don't we go outside. I'll show you the pen."

Ian followed Chins out the door, feeling both of the other men's eyes on him. Rusty's lips curled up in the threat of a grin that Ian had not, in the last hour of their acquaintance, seen him without. He raised one dirty hand and wagged his fingers, mouthed, "Bye-bye."

The cool air was welcome. Chins led the way, away from the shack and across a yard that squelched beneath Ian's shoes, caked to their soles. He stopped

and kicked them clean, only to feel the muddy weight mount in another few steps. By the time they reached the pen his legs were tired.

"My brother," Chins said, leaning against the fence, "he's tight-wound. Born that way, I guess. Though life ain't handed him nothing but sandpaper reacharounds lately."

"He's Lester's father," Ian said.

"Was."

"Is that what this is about?"

"This is about your boy and my three thousand and the fate of those two. That other fate is done now."

"I'm shut down now. The restaurant."

"That's the problem with entrepreneurs," Chins said. "People like the word 'invest,' but it's all just gambling. I only know two safe places to put money: drugs and pigs." He shrilled a whistle and a half dozen pigs, large enough for slaughter, rounded the lean-to shelter and tromped through the wallow, grunting and heaving. They hit the fence and rubbed their flanks against it feverishly. "Between the two, I'd take the pigs," he reached down and rubbed a snout, "you put food in a pig's mouth and it fattens. It don't take the food and run off, and it always comes when you call. It's an uncomplicated relationship. I feed it, I love it and then I kill and eat it. You ever kill a pig?"

"My father raised pigs and chickens until I was seven. I've seen it done."

"But you never done it. Your dad take it out with a twenty-two? Stun it?"

Ian tried to remember. "I think so."

"Figured. Me, I don't think that's civilized. It's disrespectful, to spend so much time with an animal and then put it out like that, so it doesn't even know what's going on. Man and animal alike have a right to know they're dying, even if it hurts. Death owes you that much. Me, I show them the knife. And they know, because they seen it done, too." He turned, one meaty arm straining the fence, and met Ian's eyes. "Course, someone your size tries that, the pig's liable to take that knife away, do his own work."

"Can we stop now?" Ian said. "My son owes you three thousand dollars. What will happen if he can't pay you?"

Chins sucked his teeth, turned another ninety degrees so he rested back on the pen. "See that car out at the edge? The one that's all metal?"

At the end of the line of broken trucks stood an old gray Cavalier. Someone had welded metal over the windshield and, from what Ian could see, the rest of the windows as well. The front end was bent back so viciously that the undercarriage was clearly visible, caked in mud. Ian had seen the car before, he was sure of it, before it cracked up and was reborn iron clad and tomblike.

"We had a fella' come by a few weeks back, he'd used up what I gave him for sale. A shame. He used to be an earner, clean, but he got to using and pretty soon he's standing in front of me with his hands in his pockets and fuck all else. Me and Butchie, we hauled him down to that car and bolted him in there. No light, no food, no drugs, nothing. Just like a coffin." He said the last word slowly, tenderly. Ian's hands found the plywood and squeezed hard. "Left him in there two days, till I got to

thinking about how he had the decency to come here, to apologize. A piece of shit, but not a worthless one."

"You think about it and I'll have you thrown in jail."

"No you won't." Chins stood straight and leaned into Ian, pushing him away from the fence. As Ian stepped back the mud from his shoes tripped him and he had to spin around to avoid falling into the mud. "You won't know! Where's your boy now? You wouldn't tell me, no, but that's if you knew and I'll put dollars to dimes says you don't. Your own son, and if he disappears, then he disappears more for me than he does for you."

"I don't need threats and I don't need a parenting lecture. Not from someone whose only children are the kids he dopes up, sends out as errand boys." Ian stood straight now, exhausted enough to be prepared to let what might happen happen.

"Mister," Chins said with a grin his eyes didn't share, "be careful what lines you cross."

Ian lowered his head, raised his palms. His head bobbed with three deep breaths. "Warren's never going to get you that three thousand, we both know that. So what will it take? What can I give you to settle this?"

The grin spread to his eyes. "What you got?"

"I can get you two grand. It's in the safe at the restaurant. I was going to take it to the bank tomorrow morning. Two thousand."

Chins pursed his lips, sucked in a wet, alien sound as he thought it over. "Here's the deal. Warren brings me that three thousand dollars. Elsewise, from you, I'll take four, and not one wooden nickel less."

"Four thousand?"

"Call it bastard tax."

Chins walked around Ian and with a quick nod of his head, returned to the shack, his heavy footsteps sucking at the earth. When Ian tried to turn it was as if the mud at his feet had cemented and he struggled just to free his right foot. When he finally turned, Rusty stood watching him, keys dangling from his finger.

When they had been driving a ways and were just short of the west village, Rusty asked, "He show you the car? Lester's car?"

Ian nodded, realizing now where he recognized the car from.

"Fitting, think? You imagined your boy in there? I know Butchie's imagined his. Wakes him up every night. They say when they pulled Lester free his face was near gone. Worked him over good. Think about your boy in there, drying up, drying out. Course he'll probably get a good working over too."

Ian hurled himself across the bucket seat. He grabbed Rusty by the throat, his fingers pinching at the skin. Rusty hit the brakes and both men slammed into the dashboard in one cluttered impact. They both threw wild punches in the cramped space. Rusty reared up and drove a boot heel into Ian's chest. Ian pawed at the door handle and kicked his way back out of the cab. He hit the ground hard and Rusty was on him. Dull and distant shots of pressure drove his head left and right. The woods above them spun. Ian flailed, found an arm and pulled the thin man over. Rusty toppled into the truck's open door, on his back so that his shoulders rested against the running board. Ian hit him twice. Rusty laughed. Ian reached back, found the door's rusted edge, and slammed it firm on Rusty's head. It made a noise like a melon

dropped on concrete and Rusty's head rolled and then sloughed to the side, one side swelling up red. With a desperate grunt, Ian slammed the door again and the swelling burst, spraying a thin mist of blood on the dirt and gravel and Rusty's yellowed hand.

Ian fell back on the road, one hand sunk in a muddy pothole. He gasped, clutching his shirt with one bloodied hand. The door had stayed almost closed so that Rusty's head was not visible, only the crumpled body. One boot had come loose during the fight and now rested, still and twisted like an appendage grown awry. Ian sat for a while catching his breath and listening to the truck's cantankerous idle. Something moved in the woods behind him and he was suddenly aware of the scene, of a vague sense of urgency that compelled him to stand and haul the body into the bed of the truck. When he shut the door he saw the outline of Rusty's hand, printed in the man's own blood, on the ground, like a Rorschach test, the meaning of which Ian couldn't fathom, wouldn't want to.

TWO

The sun was long set over the foothills of the White Mountains by the time Ian returned home, still wet from washing his pants clean in a stream, apologizing once more to the octogenarian farmer who gave him a ride from the far edge of town all the way to his place. The old man gave a reflexive nod of the head, a quick dip compromised by the same arthritis Ian had witnessed in the shaking of his hand on the wheel. Ian stood waving, trying to look normal, as the old man backed the length of the drive and turned slowly onto West Rumney Road. When he had gone, Ian charged up the stairs and into the house. He'd half expected to find a posse awaiting him, a stand of pick-ups, gun racks empty and menacing in their rear windows, but the house was dark and as he had left it.

They would have no way of knowing yet. He'd parked the truck up a side road, not far, just out of sight. In his panic he'd forgotten to check Rusty's pulse and wondered for the first time now, as the familiarity of his home assuaged his shock, if he had killed the man. It was possible, he supposed, but then again a human body could take a lot. He tried to remember if he'd laid Rusty on his back or on his side. The image of the thin man slumped on the ground came back to him, but when he stretched for the memory of the body in the truck bed it would not come, like a gear so stripped that no amount of grinding could find it.

He went to the phone first and carried it as he paced back and forth in his darkened living room. He considered calling the cops, but remembered Chief Hurt's attitude when he'd delivered the summons to the restaurant, on Saturday night, in

front of as many customers as he could. And his visit with the liquor commissioner, when they furnished the citation, the letter stripping The Black Brimmer of its liquor license. Hurt, a self-celebrated Korean War veteran with a mouthful of dentures he loved to remove at the bar once off-duty, had leaned close that second official visit and said, "I'll be coming by regular from now on," loud enough for the liquor commissioner to hear it, and though Ian had wanted to say something about that letter and how it made Hurt's appearance there less likely if anything, he remained staid and thanked both men before sending Louise, the bartender, home. The sheriff was tied in; he'd seen enough drunken carousing in his bar to know that. And it didn't help that, so far, all evidence of criminal activity pointed only to Ian.

The wind had picked up outside and errant leaves blew across the yard and slapped the sliding glass deck doors. Ian's glass stood empty where he'd left it. He filled it with whiskey and a splash of soda water, stirring it with a bobble of his hand. There was no way he knew of to contact Warren; the last address was long defunct. He brainstormed other people he knew but came up with only a short and fruitless list, then sat out on the porch, his shirtsleeves rolled, while the stars grew brighter and the serrated silhouette of pines blurred before the darkening sky. It would have been pleasant out; at the bar that afternoon he'd heard the weatherman call for an Indian summer.

It was past eleven when he went back inside. His hand tingled, the first sign of low blood sugar. He mixed a proper Old Fashioned, heavy on the sugar, found Annie's new number on the fridge and dialed it. She answered with the weary,

exasperated tone of a woman accustomed to the uselessness of late night panic. Ian's apologies for the late call were met with curt acceptances and then, "What is it?"

"I need to find Warren."

The voice on the other end of the line stilled. "What's he into now?"

"I need to pass a message along to him."

"Are his magazine subscriptions expiring?"

"Please, Annie. I just need to talk to our son." Ian paced as he talked, a normal habit exacerbated by circumstance.

"Of course you do."

Ian took a long drink, careful to press the mouthpiece to his neck so she wouldn't hear the ice clink. "You alone?"

"Oh, fuck," she said.

"I'm just asking," he paused, brought the phone from his ear as he blew a hard sigh through pursed lips. "How have you been?"

"I get by. You?" The word was asked out of obligation, the tone evidenced.

"The restaurant closed down today. And some other stuff."

"I'm sorry."

Ian had paced to Warren's room, which still remained open from his earlier inspection. He sat on the stripped bed, surveyed the empty room. Warren had taken everything long before Ian kicked him out. Everything gone, pawned, broken. A room Ian had never managed to finish remained now, the sheetrock walls the hull of some abandoned ship. "You remember the day we opened the place?" he asked, his tone warmer now, the purposeful pleading gone out of it.

"Long time ago."

"Three years."

"Like I said. The last time I heard from him he was staying with his friend Dean over at that trailer park on Bog Road. He called me after you finally cut him loose." A voice in the background said something Ian couldn't make out and then the line clicked silent for only a moment, muted on her end. He waited to hear her breathing again.

"Finally, huh? Why're you dancing with pronouns, Annie? 'Him,' 'he,' has a name. You can't say it?"

"Like I said, I get by, and I do it as I can."

"So say our son's name." Ian stood in the empty room. In the blindless window the reflection of an aging man, shirt untucked and hair mussed, glowered back at him.

"You follow him straight to hell," she said.

He began to holler something back at her, some witty remark intended to evoke rage and guilt and pity and at the same time curse whomever she had at her place, but the line cut dead and he got no farther than two words, which were, "I'm" and "the," neither of which gave him any clues as to what his stillborn sentence had meant to be.

The Cedar Springs Campground sign was unevenly lit by an inconstant series of floodlights. It hung over the entrance atop two lodgepoles, like the blade of a guillotine. The old Subaru coughed as it passed beneath it, a quick burst of blue

smoke shooting from the exhaust. A few errant leaves, the first to fall, spun in the car's wake, tumbling behind the rusted bumper, chasing the beaten automobile as it crept past trailers, each alike save for the yards, which were cluttered with gutted gas grills, skeletal flower beds, tiki torches and myriad automobiles, hoods still open past midnight, having reached a stalemate with their would-be mechanics. Ian scanned the mailboxes, looking for a name he couldn't remember but was sure he'd recognize. He found it at the end of the row, the last trailer before a line of empty tent sites, Poitrast marked in gold and black hardware store letters over a dented mailbox. The single-wide's yard was empty, and, as Ian unlatched the flaking gate, he noticed sporadic grass grown high; it was not a clean yard, it was a yard so unattended that nothing had been brought there to litter. By comparison the other yards seemed pleasant, their piled refuse at least artifact. The deck emitted a leisurely series of creeks as Ian crossed it. He rapped on the aluminum door and heard, felt, the shuffle of its resident. The door opened and in it, backlit so that his face was nearly indiscernible, a heavy man stood crouched in an open bathrobe, peering through the screen trying to make out his visitor.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's Ian Waters, Dean. Warren's father."

It took Dean a moment, still peering as though Ian's words had been blocked like mosquitoes by the screen. "He's not here," he said.

Ian asked if he knew where he could be found, when he'd seen him last, each question answered with a curt response. "I got nothing for you," Dean said after they'd stood silent for a while.

"How about some water?" Ian asked. He was unwilling to leave without something, some answer, and he sensed that it might take time to wheedle information from this reticent man. Dean unlatched the screen door and pushed it open slowly.

The trailer's interior made up for the desolate yard. Fast food bags with twisted tops were strewn across the spotted carpet. A toolbox had vomited its contents in the corner, hammers, wrenches and a yellow tape measure strewn about. Flystrips spiraled from the ceiling ineffective, as late season flies swarmed a pungent trashcan. Ravaged furniture circled an antiquated television; Dean pointed to one of the couches, hobbled to the kitchen. Ian sat and listened to the sound of water running, a glass filling behind him. The room stunk of Lysol and garbage and unwashed man. Dean rounded an armchair and placed the glass on an overturned crate that served as a coffee table. When Ian reached for it he saw, in a clear space between stacked bowls and a dog-eared Maxim magazine, a syringe, a pill vial, and a spoon marked with thin, concentric white circles, like salt from varying tides.

"Nothing you haven't seen before," Dean said.

"I'm diabetic." Ian put the glass to his lips, hesitant to drink from it. He couldn't tell if the water smelled or if it was just the ubiquitous stink of the room.

"Yeah. Me,too."

Dean had dark hair, straight and unevenly cut across his forehead and shoulders. His skin still wore the tan of a summer working outdoors and the pits of relentless nights. In the light, Dean looked much older than Ian remembered. He wasn't a regular at the bar, but he came in occasionally. Before Ian kicked him out,

Warren would bring Dean by on his infrequent and brief visits. Dean would sit in Ian's living room. Ian had always ignored him, knowing vaguely, but enough, the details of this man's relationship with his son; now Dean seemed intent on reversing their dynamic. "You can drink that water," he said without looking at Ian, "Then you'd best be going. I don't want my neighbors wondering why I'm getting visitors past midnight."

Ian almost laughed, mistaking the comment for levity, but thought better of it. From some other room the sound of a radio station came, the song lost in static.

"It's important that I find Warren," Ian said.

"It is."

"You don't know anything?"

Dean pulled his robe around the mound of hairy belly. "I know a thing or two," he said, "but I can't imagine much of it meaning much to you."

Ian chewed on the inside of his cheek, looked down at the matted stretch of carpet at his feet. Was this man expecting payment? A bribe? Or was he going through the motions, enforcing some cultural toll, penance for Ian's uneasy trespass.

"You're his friend," Ian said, sounding resigned at the words, but feeling revolted. "He's in some trouble and I need to find him."

Dean appeared to have stopped listening and toed his recliner in a circle, when he came to face Ian again his face was scrunched into a look of befuddlement. "When's the last time you saw him?" Dean asked.

"A few months ago."

"He's been in trouble for a while."

"I didn't know about that."

"Oh, no. I'm sure you didn't."

Ian put his glass down, picked up the pill vial, shook it so that the rattle of one lone pill filled the room. "You're better situated than I," he said.

"I heard they shut your bar down."

"I closed."

"Funny how people leave with their vices."

"Nobody wants a meal in this town if it doesn't come in a pint glass."

"I ate there once, when my brother came through town last year." His eyes glossed over again. "I had duck. I'd never had duck before."

Ian breathed hard through his nose. "How was it?"

"Good. It was good."

"That's good. Now please, Dean – " Dean held up two fingers to silence him, then stood from his chair and went to the window, spreading the blinds with the same two fingers. "Shitfire," he said. Headlights shone against the window, lighting strips across Dean's wide-eyed face. He turned to Ian. "What did you bring here?" he asked. The familiar chortle of a big diesel engine blanketed the radio and the buzzing flies.

THREE

The grocery aisle shelves stopped squat at shoulder level and were stocked with like sized goods so that, looking across, shoppers heads appeared to float on a calm and even sea of commerce. The cashier sat behind the counter, a roll of aluminum foil in one hand. He tore off strips, wadded them into little balls, and fired them at a trash can, using the State Lotto display as a backboard. He stopped his process to drink something from a Styrofoam cup. He did not look from his game as another young man, a few years older than him, entered, sounding the electric chime. The young man was draped in a military jacket, too large for his frame and too heavy for the season. He shuffled down the aisles, eyeing canned goods and chips without interest, holding baggy pants up with one hand while the other opened the beer cooler, freed a six-pack of bottled beer. In the next cooler he found two frozen dinners of his liking and cradled those, too, as he walked the length of the store to the counter, set his items down. The clerk packed one more ball, threw it and missed before swiveling to face his customer. He rang up the purchases without eye contact.

"Pack of Camels," the young man said.

The clerk reached over his head, tossed a pack of cigarettes on top of the boxed dinners. He scanned the beer. "You got I.D.?"

"You want it?"

The clerk shrugged. "I don't give a shit," he said. The young man gave no indication of offering identification. "Eighteen forty," the clerk said.

"How much for a flower?" the young man asked, nodding towards a bucket of roses behind the counter.

"Two bucks."

"I've only got twenty." The young man ran a hand over his hair, which appeared to have been cropped close at one time but had now grown to an unkempt evenness that crept over his ears and eyebrows.

The clerk turned and tugged a rose free from the bucket, tossed it on the counter where it bled pools of water over the worn *faux* wood formica. "Twenty even," he said, and took the bill, rang it up without charging for the rose. He counted out the change then pocketed it. "Bag?"

The young man nodded and said nothing as the clerk snapped a paper bag open and loaded the purchases, tucking the rose in last so that the sprig of baby's breath peeked over the serrated top.

Outside, Warren adjusted his cargo and headed down the street. Plymouth's main strip ran busy, the headlights of college kids' cars cruising, families leaving The House of Pizza. He passed the movie theater. The marquee listed two movies he'd not heard of. Neither sounded very appealing. He'd been banned from the place some time ago for passing out in the bathroom. They'd called the paramedics before discovering he was only drunk. He punched the towel dispenser on his way out and they threw him in the drunk tank for the night. The theater owner didn't press charges: he'd done no damage to the dispenser, but he was told not to return to the theater. He didn't care much; movies were a waste of time and money. He looked through his reflection in the glass, searching for the owner, the manager who'd found

him, thinking he might flip them off, maybe just glare. The lobby was packed with families and couples come for the late show. None of them was familiar.

A few blocks down he cut a right and headed down a steep, wide drive that accessed the gravel road that ran behind the stores of Main Street, bordered on the far side by defunct railroad tracks that reflected the dull light of jaundiced streetlamps. A car honked from Main Street and a clamor of cheers answered. He was expecting a good night. Connie had left a message at the motel saying she needed to talk to him about something important; he should come as soon as he could. His knees felt shaky now, which was surprising. He'd been half-expecting this for a while now. They had been having steady sex for three months now. They'd used a condom only the first time and he'd been coming inside her with increasing frequency. She'd said nothing of it and neither had he; they both seemed to be working silently towards this night and here it was. He expected she'd be freaked out, scared that he would walk out, but that wasn't what a man did. He'd drink the six pack of beer himself, heat the meals and offer them both to her, make some comment about her eating for two. She'd want to know about the drugs, but he'd already made up his mind. He was confident he could tell her he was done. The last three months had been hard again, hard as before. He was tired and had noticed his ribs stretching the skin of his abdomen. His father had always told him that tragedies were opportunities masked as breaking points. He would meet this head-on, fearless.

Warren rounded the corner of Connie's building and climbed the fire escape to the landing outside her kitchen window, his usual entrance. He pried at the window but found it locked. He knocked but no one came and so he went back down

the iron steps and entered through the front. He hated the apartment building, with its smell of gas and strange, ethnic foods, the cracked walls, the missing banister rails. He would have to get her out of here. He'd worked one winter with a crew removing asbestos from a building like this one. Some of the workers had been doing it for a decade and their every breath sounded like some tiny rockslide.

At the top of the stairs he tried the door, found it locked. He knocked and waited. Connie opened the door on the chain. Her blue eyes looked bleary, as though she'd been crying or using, one. "Are you alone?" she asked.

"Of course I'm alone." He remembered the flower, pulled it from the bag and offered it through the cracked door. Connie took it. Warren couldn't tell if she smiled or grimaced as she shut the door, slid the catch. By the time she opened it the flower rested on the hall table, beside an unfamiliar set of car keys.

"What's going on here?" he asked as he followed her down the long hall, past her bedroom and the kitchen, into the cramped living room. A boy in a puffy down jacket and blue jeans sat on one arm of the loveseat. He looked up from his hands when Warren came in. "Hey, Warren," he said.

"Hey, Otis. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to tell you as quick as I could," Connie said, stopping just between the two and turning to Warren.

"Tell me what?" the bag became leaden in his shaking arms and he put it down, drew a beer from the six-pack and prized the cap free with the butt of a lighter.

"You got good beer," Connie said.

"Yeah. Tell me what?"

Otis looked back at his hands. "I've known you since I came to town in third grade," he said, "so you should know I never wanted it like this. Neither did Connie."

"Oh, Christ," Warren said and paced a quick circle, pulling hard from the bottle. The beer went down hard and he had to swallow to keep from gagging. "Not like this," he said to Connie.

"Otis's heard things. You didn't tell me you owed money."

"You knew I owed money. What do you think paid for your drugs the last three months?"

"But, so much money."

"My debt isn't your business and," he turned to Otis, pointed at him with the mouth of his bottle," it's sure as fuck none of yours."

Otis shook his head.

"You got something to say, I'm right here," Warren said, stepping forward.

"I don't want to fight you."

"You aren't going to do much fighting. Some falling down, a lot of bleeding, maybe a little crying, but I'm not giving you much of a chance to fight." He felt the tremble in his arms, the dry taste of a thousand cigarettes in his mouth. Turning to Connie he said, "You're not pregnant?" as though he'd just remembered the way things were supposed to be.

"I sure as hell hope not," she said.

He blinked a few times, hard, then turned and swung. The beer bottle exploded off the side of Otis's head. Beer sprayed the wall. Otis fell back onto the loveseat, one hand held to his temple, blood already pouring through his fingers. He

let out a quick groan. Warren charged him, grabbed his coat with one hand and began pummeling with the other. Otis covered. Warren's fist found the back of Otis's head. In some far away place he realized he was doing his knuckles more damage than he was his enemy's head, but he continued until he felt Connie grab his jacket. He swung one last time and when he did his elbow connected with something behind him. When he came away, Connie lay sprawled on the rug, which soaked up tiny specks of blood that dripped from her covered mouth.

"Get out," she said, her words garbled.

He knelt by her. "It shouldn't end like this," he said. It was all he could think to say, one final truth. Otis groaned behind him.

"It is," she said, all apology gone now.

Warren stood and started out. He saw the cellophane sheath reflecting the hall light at the far end and remembered the grocery bag. He stepped over Connie, rolled the top of the bag over and left with it. He ran down the steps and out the door, holding his breath. Outside, he gasped. He turned as if to go back in but thought twice, tucked the bag under one arm and trudged across the gravel drive towards Main Street. He had to get back to his hotel room, and fast. He looked back at Connie's building, at her apartment window, which was lit and empty. Above, the moon was nearly covered with thickening clouds, a gray spot all that remained. It was not going to rain, he told himself as he crested the hill and headed east on Main past laughing groups of inebriated college kids, It's not going to rain. It couldn't. Not yet.

FOUR

Something small scurried not far from Ian's face. From where he lay, wedged between the couch and wall, his arms curled up under him so tight that they had begun to fall asleep as soon as he took the position, the voices echoed, slightly muted, demonic. No pleasantries had been exchanged. Chins, Ian knew from the hoarse, weary voice, had not bothered with a greeting. Beneath the dusty ruffles of the couch's skirt Ian made out another pair of boots: light brown Rangers, the toes worn to the metal, which reflected a dim pallor. While Chins walked about the room, asking questions about Warren, whom he referred to as "Little Catfish," in curt tones, the other boots remained still, mired to the place where the stained, braided rug stopped and the pitted linoleum began, like a man standing at the shore. It could have been Rusty, Ian supposed, quieter with a concussion. He found himself straining to make out the voices, waiting for the third man to speak, still unsure whether he desperately wanted Rusty to be alive or dead, and, beyond that, for whom.

"Catfish doesn't have fuckwhere to go," Chins said, the toes of his boots turned away from the other men. "and you say you haven't seen him."

"We got into it some time back. Kid's a scumbag. Ripped me off for a hundred bucks worth of Oxy." Dean spoke with the affected arrogance of someone in league with Chins, but his tone was undermined by a warbling fear from the back of his throat, a rising pitch at the end of his sentences that Ian hoped was a product of the echo chamber in which he lay.

"Hundred dollars? Well, shit." Chins walked around the couch and into the kitchen. As he did Ian could see him whole for a split second, like a single frame from a film reel. He returned drumming his fingers against something plastic. "Full garbage," he said, and dumped the trash basket's contents on the floor. Kleenex, food remnants, a few needles and more than two dozen pill vials fell to the floor with a sound like wings flapping. The smell that had permeated the apartment blew beneath the couch, concentrated. Ian pressed a hand to his face. Somewhere, unseen, the mouse scuttled for cover. "That's one hell of a prescription," Chins said. He stirred the pile of refuse with one meaty paw. "Dr. Coha, Dr. Phelps, Dr. Banks. Goddamn, you got more doctors than Carter's got..." he broke off into a false chuckle. "Little liver pills, right?"

"I'm a sick man," Dean said.

"Let's see if you can pick up what I'm putting down," Chins said. "What do you say I give the sheriff a call, get him over here to look at these. Suppose that would cause you some trouble?"

"These are all legal scrips."

The worn boots stepped from shore into the water, came up against Dean's stockinged heels. There was a brief struggle and Dean grunted twice, breathed hard. When he spoke he did so with great effort and the words sounded as if they were squeezed from somewhere so deep as to have been forgotten. "You've never been so much," he said, and then another grunt came squeezed from him.

"How many visits from Sheriff Hurt will it take before these doctors are no longer interested in treating your sickness? You have any others lined up? It could be a long winter."

Dean strained to breath. His wheezing made Ian's chest constrict. The space between the couch back and the wall seemed to shrink and he felt the cold sweat of panic rise up on his forehead. Chins came around the coffee table, stepped into the strewn garbage and sat on the couch. His bulk pressed Ian's shoulders together, all of the man's weight seemed one end of a vice now and a cough dragged its ragged nails over the back of Ian's throat.

"No more cover," Chins said. "You're a piece of shit doctor shopper and drug addict, so I don't expect you to understand business, but business is what I do and what I'm doing. I need to collect and you're as close to a personal reference as I've got."

"What about his father?" Dean asked.

"That's another matter."

"Let me go and you can have it."

The brown boots stepped back to the rug's periphery again and Dean's feet settled back on the earth, his ankles cracking. He breathed a few deep breaths. Chins shifted and all the pressure was reassigned to Ian's ribs.

"He's got a girlfriend. She lives in Plymouth. Somewhere by the tracks, because he complained about the noise when he slept there. Her name is Bonnie. It's all I got."

Chins stood, waded through the trash towards the door. Ian could see Chins head to toe now, his face calm as mortar. Ian wanted to shield his eyes, afraid their whites might give him away, but he couldn't cut his stare as his panic gave way to a moutning, impotent rage. The door opened and Chins spoke again. "Is that your car in the drive?" For a second Ian thought the large man spoke to him and he opened his mouth to respond, but heard instead Dean's voice: "My neighbor's. I let him park it there."

"He left his lights on," Chins said and went out, the other man, who Ian saw to be the redhead from the shack, followed.

Once the truck had started up outside, idled for a moment and disappeared down the street, Ian rose to his popping knees and backed out from behind the couch. Dean sat in the same recliner as he had before the sinister visit, his head in one hand, the other kimmying from the arm's edge. The tan had somehow faded from his face, leaving it ashen like an underexposed photo. Ian started to speak but Dean held a hand up, shook his head as if to say he'd heard enough. The wastebasket was on the floor and so was the trash and the mouse, brazen now, crept through paper canyons and over cutbanks of browned bananas, thrown out rather than eaten. Ian knelt, shooed the mouse and began shoveling the mess back into its home. The stench was strong but he couldn't think of anything else to do.

"She lives on Ryman, across from the lumberyard. Top floor of that complex they built a few years back."

"Who?"

"Connie. Not Bonnie. Bonnie," he said the pseudonym with disgust, "I couldn't do any better than that?"

Ian finished his cleaning and righted the trashcan. He pulled the bag's drawstring, tied it and wrestled it from the basket. He carried it to the door. When he turned, Dean had sat forward and taken the spoon in hand. He tapped a pill from the prescription vial and was in the process of rendering it powder with the back of the spoon when he looked up and noticed Ian still there. "You don't want to see this," he said, but Ian did. Or, he didn't want to leave, not yet. Chins would beat him to town and if he knew where to go he would be there and if he didn't, then he wouldn't. There was no point in haste, and Ian was tired, the panic and the rage gone now, nothing left but the sick, exhaustive sadness he'd worked so hard to forget. But work was over now and the real job remained before him and part of that job seemed to leave the trash leaned against the door and sit in the dented place Chins had sat and watch this man he barely knew attend to his sickness. Dean shrugged, raked the pill dust into the spoon with two shaky fingers.

"You'll let yourself out," he said as he searched his robe's pockets for a lighter, found one and slowly cooked the spoon, the pill melting, releasing a ribbon of black smoke. It smelled like copper and bitters. He filled the needle and rolled up one pant leg. The skin beneath it was mapped with veins and track marks, spotted with bruises in varied stages of yellowing. "His legs look like this, you know," Dean said. His eyes squinted in embarrassed anger. "Do you know? Have you seen?"

"I'm sorry," Ian said.

"You're going to have to see," Dean said. He searched out a vein in the crook of his leg, flicking and slapping the tender, loose flesh. He found his prize and pushed the needle in, pressed the plunger and sat back. The needle dangled, unattended. "And you've got no apologies for me." His voice trembled to a calm. He looked over the back of the chair and out the window, a languorous movement. "Everything that comes to my door I've invited." He began to say something more, but the words melted together and were soon one low tone, the faraway sound of a funeral dirge offered for someone neither man knew.

FIVE

Ian had stayed in the trailer for a while, half watching Dean nod off, wondering if he could be left alone, knowing that everything he witnessed was commonplace but still unable to shake the chill and nausea of the spectacle. He'd stayed until well past midnight, caught in a strange, contemplative state, somewhere between being alone and being with company, and in this state he thought a lot about his son. It didn't seem possible that he and Warren had both been living in neighboring towns for the last four months without any contact. When Annie had left, she'd done so in order to ensure that silence. "I can't be where I might see him," she'd said. "I can't wonder about every corner." Ian never accused her of abandonment; he understood breaking points in all things and it was this understanding that gave him the strength to sip coffee by the windows overlooking the driveway and watch her load the truck's cab with her belongings. When he held his hand up to the glass, like a visitor in prison, she did the same from below him. He told himself that the split was not permanent, that it would last as long as it took for Warren to find his line to walk, that they would come together again somewhere down the line; however, after the accident, after Ian had kicked Warren out for the last time, he visited Annie and found, instead of the kind of transient apartment, furnished with lawn chairs and milk crates, which he had expected, a new bedroom set, leather couches, a fully stocked refrigerator. That was in the spring, on a cold night, and he drove the fifty miles north to Rumney with every window down.

He had never accused Annie of abandonment, but he had thought it often. When, after the first month of Warren's exile, a month spent in anticipation of their next encounter, Ian began to go entire days with only rare and fleeting thoughts of his son, he began to understand his estranged wife's mindset: it was not abandonment; it was a recovery. Like the town through which he now drove, having decided it too late to find Connie, he had begun to think of familial love as a place for visiting, not for returning to.

He hit the brakes as he rounded the corner to his driveway. There, dropped across the road, a spruce tree lay. Once twenty feet tall, it now stretched from the pond's bank to the adjacent forest. Branches pinned beneath had snapped and the ochre flesh reflected the headlights. There hadn't been any wind, and Ian had felled all roadside trees this size anyways; sure enough, when he left the car he found the clean cut of a chainsaw and a path of scored dirt and upturned stones leading up East Rumney Road a few hundred yards to where it had been cut. The sweet smell of the tree's freed sap was a strange contrast to the fear the sight elicited. Ian drove up a ways to a pull-off and left the car there. He had to climb over the spruce and in the process covered himself with pitch. He jogged the hill, squinting through the dark at his house, wondering what other acts of mayhem had been committed. He imagined smoking rubble, shattered windows, a thousand dead animal carcasses laid out on the lawn like the calling cards of killers; what he found was a house intact, save for the staircase that led to the deck. They had cleaved it from the deck's rail and the cement moorings. It lay in the driveway like an echo of the tree below. The deck loomed overhead, inaccessible.

He entered through the basement, already planning how to reattach the staircase. He found the .44 he'd hidden in the insulation by the dryer's vent, the only gun that didn't disappear with Warren. It was a Smith & Wesson, with mother of pearl handle-grip and a long barrel that shone in the basement's fluorescence. A big gun, unwieldy for Ian's purposes, he first tucked it in the back of his pants, then thought better and carried it upstairs, loose in his hand as though his grip was convincing the rest of his body that its use would not be necessary.

Aside from the front stairs, the house was untouched, though little artifacts remained from the maleficent visit: the faint smell of cigarette smoke, a cellophane wrapper left on the counter, the empty decanter and dirtied glasses. He felt their presence there and knew he would not sleep. They had marked their territory and what tenuous grasp he'd held on this place as home had been pried free. In Warren's room he found a pack of cigarettes, two still remaining, as though one of the men had left in haste. The bed sunk low in the middle, and Ian was unsure if it was from him earlier, or from someone else.

Out on the porch he lit a cigarette. He didn't smoke, but felt that few of the things that had defined him that morning mattered now, and so he dragged lightly and coughed frequently as he stood at the edge of the deck, which was no longer an exit but a break in the railing, a treacherous split in the line of wood that circled the high platform. The toes of his shoes rounded beyond the splintered drop. The wind bent the tips of pines, forced a rustling of leaves. After a while, Ian set the gun on the railing. A while later he sat. His legs hung, their feet heavy and invisible in the porch's shadow. He had built the stairs that now lay disembodied in the gravel

himself, in an afternoon. His father, a union carpenter as long as Ian had known him, had taught him building when he was young. It was a skill that had served him well, though he often wondered what he might have learned in all the years he relied on that skill. For fifteen years after college he'd banged nails all over New England. A degree in business from UNH with a minor in English stayed packed in a suitcase most of that time, until he met Annie, had Warren, moved to Manchester, in southern New Hampshire, where they thought a child could be raised safely, and then, when that proved untrue, to Rumney, so isolated in the foothills that hardship could not follow. It became easy, swinging his legs and tightening his grip on the freshly cut edges of two by fours, to see how Annie had lost faith.

Ian sat until his legs numbed, walked circles on the deck and then, as light drops of water began to spot the deck, went inside. He rechecked the liquor cabinet; everything gone. He tried to watch T.V, but found only old episodes of Dukes of Hazard and infomercials. He rifled through his record collection and found a few forgotten favorites. He put the first on, The Stones, but as *Paint it Black* broke into the second verse the needle skipped so that, as Ian sat in his recliner and willed the music to continue, the room filled with, "Maybe if I turn my head, maybe if I turn my head." Ian tore the needle from the record with a zipping screech, removed the record and hurled it against the fridge where it broke into two nearly even pieces and fell to the linoleum. Ian sat back down and after a while he started thinking about the restaurant, the money in the safe, and how he'd mentioned it to Chins. The silence in the room buzzed. Every slight noise, the click and shuffle of the water heater, the refrigerator's motor, the patter of building rain on the rooftop, all the negligible

noises coalesced into a monotonous symphony, and though he'd told himself he would stay the night inside, get up early and find his son, it took only a few minutes to send him out into the rain, wrapped in a pale blue parka and shivering despite the fact that the rain was actually quite warm.

He drove through a septic fog that failed to dissipate even after the steady climb to town. He saw no other car during the drive and most house lights were down. There seemed to be a party at the apartment house adjacent to the town common's southeast corner. An open door, crowded with people, spit an orange light out into the driveway, the shadows of the people a jumbling, upside down mass trying to escape the crowded interior. Crossing the intervale, Ian killed the Subaru's lights to see how dark it really was, and had to revive them instantly, for the moon held no purchase over the town.

When he arrived at the Black Brimmer, he found the back door unlocked and open a crack. He crept through the door, stole through the greasy dish pit, his heart beating fast, the .45 clutched in one sweaty hand, it's mother of pearl handle slick. The hood fans whirred overhead, stirring the smell of cool fryolater grease and dirty mop buckets. Each corner of the labyrinthine kitchen hid an assault. By the time he made it to the swinging doors that opened to the bar, his knuckles ached around the handle. Pushing the door open just far enough to steal a look at the bar, Ian saw, reflecting the dim mirror lights, several drinks, drinks that had not been there when he left. There was no sound except the lobster tank's pump, the steady stream of cycling water. He eased the door closed behind him. The drinks were all empty. Whoever had been there must have left, though he wondered how they'd gotten in. He knelt

behind the bar to check the safe, which was untouched, the dial still set to the number twenty-eight, which was the date of his anniversary to Annie and the number he left it on always, still, out of habit.

As he stood the sound of laughter and the softer sound of shushing came from the bathroom at the far corner of the bar. It was not the laughter of assassins, Ian thought; it sounded more like drunken teenagers and this renewed an angry strength in Ian. He had rounded the bar and was halfway to the door, ready to kick it open with a foot, when it occurred to him that it might be Warren, who had access to the spare key and cause to seek shelter. This thought froze him at the center of the bar. He steadied himself against a chair's back. More laughter surged from the bathroom, more shushing that lost itself in a deeper guffaw. Ian breathed deep. The last time he'd seen Warren, his son had been coming down and vicious. They had struggled briefly, as Ian tried to keep Warren from the basement, where he knew the last gun to be. They had clinched in the narrow hallway, and after a quick stalemate, Warren muscled Ian into the living room. When the broke into the larger room's clearing, Ian nearly stumbled. Warren had let him go then, stepped back, as shocked as Ian at his victory. It was apparent to Ian then, for the first time, that his son possessed the strength and will to hurt him; this new development frightened him in an unfamiliar way, like the fear of deep water, an invisible, unknowable space beneath him where land once was. Now he stood to full height and stalked to the door, his mind ignoring what his legs did as they pushed the door open on its swinging hinges. Two boys spun and shrieked in the brightly lit room. They saw the gun and one turned and ran

straight into the wall of the bathroom stall partition, fell back on his ass. The second, Kenny, only held up his hands as if to catch the echoes of his scream.

Ian stood ramrod straight in the bathroom, feeling faint and trying to keep himself vertical, in charge. When the feeling had passed he whiplashed into anger again. With the gun still trained on Kenny he ushered them back to the bar, gestured to a table. He waited until they were seated, each boy staring at the same ashtray before saying anything. To the boy he didn't recognize he said: "You're bleeding."

"I know," he whispered. Blood dripped from his nose to his lap. The boy made no motion to stem it, but kept his hands flat on the table, as did Kenny, as though they were trained to this interaction. Ian wondered if this was where it all started.

Kenny began to talk, a verbal representation of his comrade's nose. "I'm sorry Mr. Waters. The back door is broken and we came in to get something I forgot. We were just getting that, having one drink. I was showing my brother how to make a tequila sunrise."

"It was beautiful," came the nasally voice.

Ian tossed the boy a handful of napkins from another table. He looked at them for a second, as though unsure what to do with them, then pressed them to his face.

"Squeeze the bridge of your nose. It'll stop faster." Then, to Kenny, "How long has this been happening."

"Just tonight." The boy's breath met Ian from a distance. "A few other times. The metal door out back, you can bend it far enough to reach the lock. One of the other guys showed me a long time ago. I'm sorry," he said again. He eyed the gun as

he spoke. Ian went to the bar, set the gun on top of the safe, and mixed himself a drink.

"Bend of no bend, this counts as breaking and entering. Petty theft, I'm sure. Don't hang your heads, boys, look at me when I'm speaking." He wasn't bothering with the mixers; ice and bourbon and the glass. As he poured again he attempted a plan. He couldn't call the cops, they might be looking for him for all he knew and, besides, he wouldn't have wanted to anyways. They weren't bad kids and their offense was no greater than his own at their age; but also there lingered the thought of his own son, out in the foggy night somewhere, drug addicted, desperate, violent. How did Warren get there and what could he, Ian, have done differently. When Warren came home drunk the first time, when he was a few years younger than Kenny, Ian had written it off as youthful experimentation and counted the boy's sickness that night and that morning as penance paid; now it seemed only the beginning of the cost Warren would have to pay.

"I'm going to take you home," he said. "Your parents need to know where you've been."

"There's only Ma," Kenny said. "Dad left when Bruno was born."

Bruno looked up from his napkin, shrugged.

"Then she'll need to know. I'll drive you in a few minutes," he said, and tipped the bottle again to the mouth of his glass.

SIX

The white truck was parked upon a high bank that overlooked the Baker River. It's engine ticked, a steady metronome, and faint wisps of steam rose from the bent and crooked corners of the hood, joined the river fog an insignificant tributary. A man slept a bothered sleep in the cab, his rust-colored hair pressed against the window. A patch of steam marked the window by his mouth, sustained by harried breaths. The Hellas mounted upon the roll bar shone miasmic beams through the haze, illuminating the truss of a train trestle, rusted and tattooed with graffiti. Had the man in the cab woken from his nightmare, he would have seen, on the bridge, the silhouette of a much larger man pass through the Hella's rays like a stage hand wandering from wing to wing, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his Carhartt jacket, hunched and hitching from leg to leg like a man hobbled.

The stones between the rails ground beneath his step. He lifted each leg in a jerking motion as he walked, set it down with the trace of a grimace on his face. He'd been walking the span of the trestle for twenty minutes now and the pain had not subsided. It was not unusual for Chins, the deep hollow pain somewhere that he described to others, on the rare occasion he found cause to, as a pain in his lower back, but that was actually located somewhere deep in his ass. It was not unusual, but it was usually short-lived and almost always arrived when he was sleeping. Five, ten minutes of walking shook it. This time it had arrived as they drove out of town, after spending the night in bars asking for this Connie, if anyone knew where she lived, if anyone had seen Warren lately. The responses had been universally and, he believed

honestly, negative. They had asked after Ian, too, though few bartenders knew who they spoke of; after what had been done to Rusty, he would need some attention, too, though Chins had spent much of their bar time deciding what would be the worse punishment.

They had drunk a good amount at the bars and Butchie had gone from tersely somber to morose and Chins knew enough to take him driving then until the hum of the engine lulled him to sleep; otherwise it would end with some random violence, police, crying lovers crouched over bloodied bodies late Friday night. He'd seen it before.

He understood it, too. He had lost a child, stillborn, though, and it was so many years ago that he thought of her infrequently, as he thought of the mother, his girlfriend of many years, whose whereabouts he no longer knew. People slipped away. Everyone but kin, and even they could slip away in subtle ways, like dead limbs compromising the health of the tree. He'd seen it in his father after his mother's death, the steady decline: the pigs slimming late in the season; the truck driven all that winter without snow tires up a drive of packed snow; and rust on the plow, the silverware; rust on all the hinges in the house. It wasn't long after that the cancer took the old man. Cancer: a work Chins avoided now, to the point of having forgotten the word altogether, save for his late-night walks.

His father's emotional breaking point was manifest now, looming in Butchie's future, which scared Chins, as it enforced a vague notion of genetics that meant he, as well as his brother, could be destined for the one of his father's fates, and he was unsure if he envied Butchie the psychological parcel. A week earlier, on the one

month anniversary of Lester's death, Butchie had taken the chainsaw, oiled it, filled it with gas, and set to carving a path through the woods behind the house, up the hill to the low shoulder of Rattlesnake Mountain, leaving a trail of hastily felled trees, the scent of gas and spilt sap. When Chins found him, resting at the shoulder's crest, the chainsaw steaming in a wet smear of last year's crumbling leaves, Butchie wouldn't speak a word. Chins sat with him for a while, on a freshly cut Aspen, and then left him there. Sometimes a man needed to walk alone.

But there was business to consider, too, and Chins had been wondering, as he paced the crossboards, how much of their mission was duty of one sort versus the other. The three-thousand dollars was negligible; it's theft was not. These were facts in his life and he had made men cripples, had made men disappear, for less, and almost always in the fall, as if the greed of some junkie hibernation instinct compelled them to make the same mistake over and again. Convenient, though, for Chins: hunting season made for easy excuses, options for disposal.

The pain had begun to subside, creeping back inside him. He thought he heard the faraway whistle of an approaching train, but decided on a car horn out on the highway, since Rumney had existed on the end of a dead line since he was a teenager. He backed down the embankment to where the truck was parked, cooling its temperamental radiator. He climbed in the cab, rocking the truck. Butchie muttered in his sleep, pitched forward. It sounded as if he said, "No, no," but when Chins unsuccessfully cranked the engine the red-head sat up straight and choked out the word, "Motel."

"Motel?" Chins asked, warming the engine with a few pumps of the accelerator.

Butchie stared straight ahead, as though he was still asleep and saw before him, in his dream-state, a motel rather than a bridge. "That motel where we found Darl after he run out, the one your old lady stayed at way back. He's got any money left, that's the only place would want him." Butchie turned now, fully awake, and raised his fiery eyebrows as if to say that the engine was primed and it was time for acceleration.

SEVEN

Kenny lived in a trailer perched atop a steep drive and Ian had to park sideways in the yard, blocking the only other car in, for fear that without a working emergency brake, the gears might dislodge and send the Subaru rolling backwards into the woods. Both boys sat staring at the house as a yard light came on in response to the headlights. Their drunk had worn off and they both wore the tremulous expressions of younger children apprehensive of scorn. Ian opened his door and the boys did the same, followed him to the trailer's door. He had not rapped but once when the door swung open, hitting his knuckles with the edge and causing him to withdraw his hand to his mouth where he sucked a slim split in his knuckle.

"What in the name of ballspit?" the woman standing above them, wrapped in a terry-cloth robe, her legs jutting long and sapling thin from the hem. She had a young, flattened face, like that on a coin. She'd been sleeping with her makeup on and each contour seemed marked by a deep crease: a furrow line between unevenly plucked eyebrows; marks like those a carpenter made on wood pinched at the corners of her eyes; faint laugh lines, more likely borne of grimace.

"I'm Ian Waters," he said, extending his hand.

"I know who you are," she said, pulling the robe tighter around her.

"I found your boys at my restaurant. They've been drinking. They must've snuck out." He let his hand drop unattended.

"Can't call the cops," she said, her voice rising and falling on each word regardless of import. "You lost that restaurant. That's what I hear."

"I did lose it, yes."

"So you can't call the cops. You all're trespassing, too."

"I don't want to call the cops. There aren't any cops involved. I'm not pressing charges, I just wanted you to know where they'd been, so you can..." he paused, flipping his hands about as he tried to figure out, still, what he would do were he her, "do whatever it is you do."

"Whatever it is I do?" She seemed to have sensed derisiveness in his voice and responded in like kind.

"I didn't mean..."

"Get on in," she said to the boys and stepped aside as they passed, heads down. She slapped the youngest on the back of the neck and he received it without a sound.

"What will you do?" Ian meant the question in earnest, as an offering of truce. He wanted to know what other people did in this situation, if only to gage his own past actions by comparison.

"What will I do? What would you do?" Her brows pushed together, exacerbating the line at their center. "Mr. Expert Father. What would you do?"

Leaves shuffled beneath Ian's feet. The exhaustion he'd been running from had overtaken him now and the woman's rancor seemed just another incarnation of this weary collapse. "I've made mistakes," he said, and turned to leave. He sidestepped a soiled doll that lay by the trailer's wheel and wondered if Kenny had a sister, too, that he'd never spoken of.

"I've known 'em like you," the woman called to his back. "You can say you made mistakes, but that don't change their making. Don't change a piss-stained thing." She started coughing and was still coughing when Ian made his three-point turn and escape.

The dashboard clock read 4:45. Late, but not yet late enough. Ian drove the back road to Plymouth, passing again the Cedar Springs sign. He crossed the single-lane bridge that spanned the Baker River. The rain had stopped and his headlights reflected off the rainwater that pooled in the road's tire troughs, ran off through the circuits of cracks that led to the crumbled bank of shattered asphalt and shattered bottles. A sign that read *Entering Plymouth, New Hampshire: Population 2,000* was mottled with buckshot.

The streetlights shone on wet and empty streets as Ian entered the town proper. He braked down Hillside Drive, threading the road's thin needle between the stoic brick University Buildings. A rendering of The Thinker held post before the mirror-windowed library, viewing the town from his perch with introspective disregard. At the bottom of the hill he rounded Plymouth's town common, larger than Rumney's with a white and green Gazebo at the center, maples and elms planted strategically just beyond the white fence. Main Street passed Ian by silent and dark, the windows already adorned with Halloween decorations: paper pumpkins and slogans of "Prices Slashed," tagged in the word bubble of a hollow-faced grim reaper.

At the far end of town Ian pulled into The Overflow Diner's parking lot. The diner sat on the low plateau along the Pemigewassett river. The elms adjacent hung over black water. The river flooded every spring and the Overflow had been raised

on thick beams the shape and texture of telephone poles. Ian climbed the rickety stairs to the front door, entered and took a seat at the bar, where one other man drank a Budweiser, a plate of biscuits and gravy before him, garnished with four aspirin. Flow, who ran the diner with a congenial authority, backed through kitchen half-doors reminiscent of the old west. She wore her curly, auburn hair tied back, knotted with a severed apron string that echoed the one that rounded the back of her neck. She smiled when she saw him, the wide grin elbowing her adipose cheeks.

"Nothing strange about a stranger. You been dredging the river?" she asked, eyeing his wet parka, hair.

"Something like that."

"And what did you find."

"Not a damn thing."

"Yeah, well, you can't catch ghosts in a net." She made coffee while talking, and it seemed neither activity required the least of her attention. She flipped, filled, poured and placed with the ease of repetition. She spoke as someone with no concern for how little, or how much, her words might matter.

"Another fire started out your way," she said, wiping the counter before him now, always moving.

"That so?"

"They say this morning we'll be able to see the smoke. Started yesterday, the far side of one of your hills."

He told her he'd seen nothing the night before, though he hadn't been looking either. It was the second fire so far, unusual so late in the season. People at the bar

talked about arson, bar the people that frequented his bar at the end would call arson on a chimney fire. It took a while, but Flo finally asked him about the restaurant. "It's a shame," she said. "Shameful." He told her that it was all right, that he had lost the love for it anyways, but she only shook her head and kissed her fingertips, as if to say from one restaurateur to another that his food told the truths his mouth would not, then she splayed her fingers and let them flutter in the air, as if to say something else, like good-bye. Ian ordered coffee, a biscuit with butter and jam, and sat while she withdrew to the kitchen to make his food. She had the personality he had always felt he'd lacked as an owner. Perhaps that was why his clientele had been so unpleasant by the end, perhaps it was his unapproachable disposition that had kept the wealthy tourists out and invited in the equally unapproachable, even the reprobate. It was possible, though more likely it was the fact that he had a fully stocked bar, compared to Flo's beer cooler. As he waited, he tried not to think of the night that had robbed him of that liquor license, the night that had bankrupted him and began the flood of animosity and accusation that had led him to where he sat now, hunched over a cup of black coffee, waiting for an hour reasonable enough to begin tracking his son, hopefully finding him before his would-be assassins. He tried not to think of the night, but the memories were as the restless dead. The police cruiser tearing past the bar's atrium windows as Ian closed up for the night, the ambulance's red strobe following. The feeling, even before passing the wrecked and familiar Cavalier, it's gray front end mangled and strewn along the steel cables of guard rails, that this was bad for many people, and that he might be one. The splintered, blackened posts, some wedged beneath the car's frame, some pummeled in its wake. The shimmering

oil like mercury spread across the road, marking the footprints of firefighters who charged around the crippled vehicles carrying large and formidable-looking tools. The feeling that the oil was a boundary he could not cross coupled with an awareness that he could not stay there, could not witness this gruesome scene and have everything remain as it had been. When Flo returned, his food in hand, she placed it on the counter and retreated without a word, seeming to have sensed in his pensive gaze the burnt bridge of a man distraught, another impasse.

Ian's visit with Connie was short. He woke her, knew he would. She came to the door wrapped in a towel. They spoke through the threshold. The warm smell of candles from inside her apartment found Ian through the hall's gaseous odor. Her pale shoulders bare and specked with lingering summer freckles. She had pale hair, skin; her lips blended with the skin of her cheeks. She was plain, but not unattractive, and Ian wondered, as he stood, hands at his side, willing his eyes upon her face, how his son had managed such a girl in such a state. The last time he'd seen Warren the boy had looked like something born beneath a rock and bound for a hard place, his gaunt face stamped with two shifting eyes, his skin the jaundiced color of eggshells. She told him the name of the hotel he'd been staying at. When he asked if anyone else had been by looking for him she said no and when he warned her that someone might she responded with a quick nod of the head, failing to grasp the gravity of his tone. She wanted him gone, that much was obvious, and it wasn't just for the early hour. "If he comes by, tell him he needs to contact me immediately," Ian said, stressing the last word. "Yeah," she said. "If he stops by," and something in her tone

told him that Warren would not be stopping by and that whatever had brought this young woman to Warren had failed them both. He felt, then, a rush of sadness for his son, because drug addiction was something he didn't feel he understood, but heartbreak was universal.

Though Connie couldn't remember the number of the apartment, she'd known it was near the end of the motel's strip. When he arrived it was easy to find. Two doors down from the end of the row, the mouth of a doorway loomed agape. Ian went to the door and knocked at the frame, the Smith & Wesson held behind his back. The door had been knocked loose at top and tilted inward, bound by the straining grasp of the lower hinge. Its frame was splintered at the deadbolt and doorknob. Wood fragments freckled the floor, forming a path to the smashed lamps and overturned mattress, the bedlam of the room. Muddy boot prints marred the soiled rug. A steady breeze blew in through a shattered window, cross-ventilating the dark room. Ian's parka felt tight and hot around his chest, the gun heavy in his hand. He had to sit on the box spring, which leaned against the empty metal bed frame and feinted under his weight. Signs of a struggle, he thought over and again, as if an investigator, some impartial observer whose observations were limited to the most obvious of facts. Cars passed in streaks beyond the door. The sun burned through the shattered window, gleamed from a streak of red. Ian navigated the room's littered floor and ran a finger over the stained shard of glass. It came away red with blood and he thought for a moment of putting it to his tongue, the next act of inquiry, as though taste might confirm his suspicion: that this blood was his own.

EIGHT

A strip of marshland ran alongside route twenty-five, down an embankment so blanketed in sand and saturated with salt that between the road and the marsh only the most tenacious grass grew and even then it did so in shades of gray and brown, a concession made that even this struggling life was fleeting. The ribbon of marsh by contrast yielded tall grass as thick as corn husks and cat's tails that bobbed at eye's height in the early morning wind that came down through the valley, funneled through the series of interstate overpasses and down route twenty-five towards Rumney.

In this same direction, bare footprints, sunk deep in the marsh's muck, marched. They were stretched far apart in the bare stretches where the shelter of grass broke and then grew closer, more timid through the covered patches. The ribbon of roadside wetland continued to a deep trough by the elbow of an on-ramp intersection. In this well, Warren knelt. Water had seeped all the way to the pockets of his jeans and mud marred the elbows of his long-sleeved t-shirt. He peered through the grass, watching for a break in the traffic, watching more closely for a specific truck. His face was slit in a few places from the blades of grass, none so deep as to bleed, but each stinging so that he had to press the backside of his hand to each cut periodically. A longer, deeper cut, the product of a hasty window breaking back at the motel, released a trail of blood from his forehead, between the bridge of his nose and his left eye, down over his chin where it disappeared into the mess of his shirt.

He'd been sitting on the bed when the knock came and before fear set in he thought only that it was odd, since he'd just had a thought, a kind prayer really, the kind of prayer people make when they don't believe in God but figure that things had gotten bad enough it couldn't hurt. He prayed that someone would come and deliver him. These were not the words he used in his silent plea; he thought more along the lines of, *Something's got to give, something's got to go right or I won't make it*, and so when the knock sounded, he received it first with the flutter of hope, a feeling extinguished before he even looked through the peep hole, as there was, to the best of his knowledge, only one person who would take the trouble to find him and that one person would offer no deliverance that he wanted.

The knock came again, harder this time, but Warren already had one of the pillows up against the window that looked out onto the motel's back yard and the steep hill that bordered it. He tried first for a quiet break, but when the knock at the door became a shout he sacrificed silence for efficacy and smashed the window with his own hand. He covered his face with one arm. Shards fell around his bare feet. Voices beyond the door raised in argument. His shoes lay upturned on the far side of the room. His bag, which contained everything he owned, needed, peeked from beneath the dust skirt of his unmade bed. He spent one second trying to decide between the two before the door exploded inward, flapping open and then bouncing back closed only to be pushed open again. Warren made out only the doorway-filling silhouette, then turned and, abandoning all, threw himself through the window. He landed on the other side, hard on his rib cage. He felt the cut on his forehead, cuts on his arms and legs, as if from a distance or through some medicinal haze. He rolled on

his back, tried to catch his breath. Chins's head hovered above him in the dark space of the window.

"You're gonna make this go painful," he said, and through his fear Warren detected something in the large man's face, something that said he was too tired to run, and this brought Warren to his feet and propelled him toward the hill. He was halfway up the hill, a mixture of new and old leaves crumbling and slipping beneath his bare feet, when he heard the crashing coming from his right. Beneath him, but coming up fast, Butch ran in a lineman's crouch, arms pumping. He didn't seem to breath. His lips were drawn tight together. Only his eyes bulged with each heaving motion. Torn-toed boots stomped the fallen branches that lay in his way. Warren grabbed a sapling and hauled himself up the steepening slope. His muscles, his lungs, burned. He hacked a dry cough and pushed himself harder, coming to the crest of the hill. He fell. A tree splintered behind him. He heard Butch's breaths now, finally wrestled out of him, quick grunting pants, almost sexual in their yearning. It was this sound that brought Warren to his feet and sent him charging down the far side of the hill. The far side was steeper and angled towards a rocky streambed that ran a centerline through the gully proper. The trees around him had broken into full foliage and he shot through their midst like a dull bullet from the barrel's fire. He slipped, tumbled, righted himself and fell again. He slid long enough to avoid collision with tree or rock and then tumbled as he could again, all hesitation to pray gone now.

He rolled onto the flat stream bank, settled on his knees. It took him a moment to find Butch's bright orange hunting jacket in the like-colored leaves. He lay wrapped around a tree, writhing and clutching one shoulder. A swath of

unearthed soil above him marked his slide; the tree between him and Warren marked its terminus. Butch grunted, his mouth open as if to say something, but instead presenting itself as a dumb rictus in the center of a face too furious for words. Warren did not wait for Butch to find his voice. He ran along the streambed, down to the flaxen field, which he crossed headed west, towards the highway that led to Rumney. He did so more for desperate instinct than he did for thoughts of home.

Now the medicinal haze had worn off and pains both old and new assaulted him. He had spent the whole night previous pacing back and forth to the bathroom, where he would throw up and try, lying on the cool, stained tiles, to convince himself not to open his backpack, not to go where he was so sure he would go eventually anyways. Kneeling in the marsh, every laceration and ache only exacerbated his condition. He needed to get back to the motel. All of his stuff was there. He needed shoes. And the traffic above him showed no sign of slowing. He turned and followed his own footsteps back through the marsh, stepping in them sometimes; other times making fresh marks.

Avoiding the steep climb, he rounded the base of the hill, skirting the interstate. Dust from passing cars settled in his hair. Their exhaust choked the air. The boy had to walk a long way to circumnavigate the hill and most of the energy was gone out of him by the time he came into sight of the motel. His hands shook and something more vicious than the exhaust had begun to clog his lungs, draw the center of his throat taut. He walked a drunk's lilting gate as he emerged from the copse of pine trees adjacent to the motel. Looming over the single-level strip of makeshift apartments was the hill, still scored in places from his escape, his

assailant's trail. The white truck was not a presence in the parking lot, but Warren knew they might have taken any of the jalopies they kept, uninspected and overused, for such a mercenary occasion.

Traffic broke and Warren darted across the road. He tried to keep a feel for all his surroundings, tried to affect a soldier's presence of mind, but his synapses fired like unpumped air guns and the harder he tried, the dizzier he felt.

The door was still open, swung deep into the darkness of the motel room. Warren crept between cars and with a dauntless gesture that surprised even him, stepped into his room, arms at his side, expecting and willing to receive the worst. As his eyes adjusted he made out the gleam of metal, something closer to him than he had expected, someone not far beyond it. His pupils dilated. The room was filled with a familiar, gasping breath. The room around him developed. Warren, who had never fired a gun and knew very little about them, still recognized himself, then, smeared and bloody and barefoot, as being on the wrong end.

NINE

Even after he recognized the torn figure before him as his son, Ian refused to lower his gun. The two men, one past the point of fruitful growing and the other looking without age for his wear, circled, box stepping in the square of light from the shattered window.

"You going to shoot me now, Dad?" Warren spoke the title as if to a man unworthy. "Shoot me." He held his hands up. They were stained with mud and blood.

"What are you doing?"

"I came to get my shit." Warren broke from their awkward waltz and went to the overturned bed. He rifled through the sheets, pulled the box spring vertical to look beneath it. "Fuck," he said, so quietly that Ian barely heard it.

"Looks like you've been partying a little too hard."

"I don't need your concern."

"You do need my help." Ian lowered the gun.

A new body blocked the doorway and both Ian and Warren swiveled towards it. Ian's grip tightened on the .45.

"I don't know what's going on here, but I'm about to call the cops unless you've got a story for me." The voice sounded chalky, like shaving after a week in the woods, and Ian had no doubt that while the speaker's first statement might be false, the second was definitely not.

"You own this place?" Ian asked.

The man stepped into the room and turned from Warren to Ian. Sidelit, his face was formed of wrinkle and crease alone, like sand dunes seen from high above. He was dwarf short with a clean pate daubed with liver spots. "My place. Which means I do the remodeling." He shook his head, one gray eyebrow heavy, the other light. "Your story better be bible quality, boys."

Ian, irritated with the owner's tone, more irritated, if he was honest about it, with the old man placing him in league with his feckless son by way of the one word, "boys," offered no explanation, but pulled a large fold of bills from his front pocket. He peeled hundreds, one for the window and two for the door. He knew construction prices from five years earlier, but was sure that his offer was generous. He handed the bills to the owner, who took them in one wrenched hand, then turned to Warren. "I'm through with you," he said. "Time to go." Then he turned and left them there. When Ian turned back from the door, Warren's eyes were pinned to the roll of cash in his hand. Ian tucked it back in his pocket, adjusted the gun in the back of his pants.

"That sounded familiar," Warren said, having returned to his rummaging.

"That sounded like evidence that you need my help."

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, looks like it."

Warren sighed, sat down on the bed with an air of collapse. After a while he stood and went to the bathroom. Ian heard a rustling, the sound of a metal trashcan banging against a wall. Warren returned, leaving the bathroom door open behind him. "You can leave now," he said. "I'll pay you that money back when I can."

"Your debts are more outstanding than that. And I think we'd both better leave before they come back," he said, nodding towards the door. A seagull, one hundred miles lost, landed in the parking lot and pecked at the gravel.

"How do you know?"

"We've got a lot of explaining to do. Elsewhere."

"I've got to clean up."

Ian nodded again. Warren passed Ian to get his sneakers and as he did Ian smelled the familiar scent of his son: sweat pregnant with toxins, unwashed clothes, the salty odor of tears. It was a smell he'd had to Lysol out of the bedroom, though the antiseptic odor only reminded him more of what he'd tried to erase. Warren took his shoes into the bathroom. Water ran. Ian stood guard at the door, watching the seagull turn confused rotations. The seagull had picked up and discarded half a dozen pieces of gravel by the time Warren emerged, looking no cleaner, but calmer. Almost mollified, he bypassed Ian and slid into the Subaru's passenger seat as if it had been waiting for him all along. Ian climbed behind the wheel, pulled into traffic. As they drove down the on-ramp to route twenty-five, passing the stomped well of marsh grass and cat's tails, Ian eyed Warren askance. The young man's muddy face smeared the passenger window, received the world through a stagnant gaze. Ian couldn't help but think of his son's angry words, how difficult this would all be; he couldn't help but think that something in his son spoke of the wolf; something of the lamb.

They drove route twenty-five west, through the strip of paint and movie stores, the discount marts and super markets flanking the road, which had mostly dried now, the water having puddle alongside the road and wetted the grass that grew there. The town's sole traffic light held its green and Ian did not slow. He drove with a steady foot, rendering physical what he could not manage in his mind. Now that he had Warren riding shotgun, collapsed and worn and battered, looking like a young man suddenly uprooted from some faraway battlefield, transported to the passenger seat of his father's Subaru, Ian had no idea what to do with his mess of a son. The mud Warren carried stained the upholstery, which was torn and near to worthless anyways; it had dried in the thinner spots and flaked off when he twisted, which he did silently and without cause. If there was any doubt that his son was using, his boneless slump dispelled it.

Still, Ian felt good. He bypassed the back road turn-off, taking the long way home, as he wasn't sure that the back road was safe, or that home was safe, or that, somewhere along that long way home his destination might change. It was this thought that caused him to tap a finger on the shifter, in time with Merle Haggard's, *Mama Tried,* which played only in his head. He'd waited until Warren was out before pulling the gun from his waistband and tucking it beneath the seat. He could still feel the cool of the metal in the small of his back, an empowering feeling combined with his son at his side. He didn't want to think of it as a victory, certainly not yet, but still he felt the swelling of triumph. For a year now he'd had to stand behind the bar, greet the locals as they swarmed his bar Thursday through Saturday. Flannel clad with perpetually dirty hands clutching mugs of Budweiser, which he'd

taken off tap at one point only to replace their mugs with bottles at a lesser profit, the caroused. It was the only word for it: caroused. They toasted menial accomplishments, a grandson's three-week birthday, a daughter's graduation from the third grade. For the rare marriage or high school graduation there would be singing that could be heard into the first dining room. Divorces could be heard in the second. If Ian had a dollar for every time some bearded man in a baseball cap told him he should try serving breakfast all day long, he could have made up the tips that were not forthcoming. Now he had just under two thousand dollars in his pocket and glove box, and, though much of it was owed, he wasn't thinking about that; instead he was doing the math: figuring gas mileage, distances, opening the map of the country to route possibilities with destinations unknown. If Rusty's mangled face was left in their exhaust so be it. If Chins was three thousand dollars poorer, it was, as Ian's father was like to say, "the way the smoke blows."

Ian turned on the radio as they threaded the covered bridge and entered Rumney Village. Godsends shone through the dissipating cloud cover, spotlighting brilliant, foliaged circles on the mountainside. Pumpkins and other gourds overflowed a plywood table by the side of the road, the colors of fall strewn about the spindly legs. A woman Ian didn't recognize tugged the dry carcasses of flowers from a bed in front of the Calico Cupboard knitting store. The radio announcer voiced some inane opinion about a song that had just played and promised more after a commercial break. Ian hit scan and the tape player's display flipped through the stations and settled back on WPNH, where the commercials had commenced.

Warren stirred, wiped a clean hand against his face and brought it away dirty. He sat up, like a mummy resurrected, put a suspicious eye on Ian then slipped back into his seat and mumbled something that sounded like a question. As the commercials ran on, ads for John Deere, Shop & Save and Wal-Mart, public service announcements concerned with drinking and driving, Ian devised the skeleton of a plan. They would go home, gather what they needed, and drive to Concord. Annie would put them up for a night, maybe two while they fleshed out the rest of the trip. Warren would take some convincing. He held for the town an attraction that was more dependence than affection. In the last three years it became a safety zone for him, even as the town itself conspired to make life there more dangerous for him. The cops knew him and his record and responded accordingly, pulling him over for what they wanted and citing him for what they could. If Ian remembered correctly, Warren now had a charge each for DUI, possession of narcotics, reckless driving, destruction of private property and two citations for possession of marijuana. Two of the charges were felonies, leaving only one more strike, a strike that the police force of both Rumney and Plymouth seemed intent on throwing. Even with prison time there, waiting for him like a lover at the end of the line, even marked by a gang of redneck drug dealers, Warren rarely left Grafton County and had never, as many times as Ian or Annie had suggested it, entertained for even the briefest moment the notion of moving any farther than he could carry a backpack. Ian imagined things different this time, if they could only get to Concord.

But there was Warren's addiction to consider, too. He wouldn't quit cold, probably couldn't, but nor would he surrender his frequent fix. Ian knew this, and as

he turned up East Rumney Road, the steady hum of asphalt replaced with the inconstant scrape of dirt and gravel, Ian eyed his son's backpack. He drove with one hand, slowly advancing the other. It grazed Warren's knee, found the backpack's top strap. He raised it, trying to keep it from bumping the legs that framed it. Ian's muscles strained at the slowness. He drew it clear and settled it in his lap, watching the road and the passenger seat with alternating glimpses. He took inventory of the bag, conscious of the risks inherent in even reaching into it. A six pack of beer bottles, two still full; wobbed socks; the Zippo Ian's father had passed down to him, scribed *Vis Unita Fortier*; a few CDs and cassettes; crumpled cigarette packs; and a journal, which looked worn, though a quick thumbing found it empty, as though his son had had many occasions to write, but never the words. Ian found no drugs, but noticed, as he replaced the bag, a bulge in Warren's sweatshirt pocket. Through the thin opening of the bib pocket he saw the cracked leather of a pouch, the black zipper's pull resting between cottony folds. He reached into the pocket, pinched the zipper between two fingers. He realized he was holding his breath and let out one long exhalation, just as his father had taught him to do before firing a rifle, then tugged the pouch free. It had not left it's storage space before Warren, like a man awoken to find someone prizing free a finger, lunged forward and then at Ian. He lashed out, fists flailing against man and window alike. He hit Ian across the nose. Ian's head bounced off the head rest and received another blow, this one to the cheek. He fought back with his right hand. He blocked. Warren grunted, gutteral. He fell back in his seat then pushed off the door and was at Ian again. Ian tried to steer the

car into a pull-off, but Warren's arms came down on his own and he lost hold of the wheel beneath his son's thrashing.

The car left the road, two sickle-shaped skid marks trailing it. It cleared the embankment and landed in a clearing. The Subaru bounced, the deafening sound of tires striking wheel-wells, rotors rapping off piston arms. Two tires exploded in cannon-fire and the car tilted forward, the hood buckling as it stood on end for a second, both passengers pressed against the shattered window, before falling back on rims and rubber and settling with sporadic pops, clangs, the steady hiss of broken belts and radiator, the squawk of birds disrupted and fleeing the scene, as neither man was like to do. They lay still, both of them covered in blood now, as if bleeding was genetic.

TEN

Warren Waters the first, Ian's father as well as his son's namesake, took his first job working the rails in Manchester, New Hampshire when he was thirteen. He was the youngest of the workers, which earned him begrudging acceptance from some and the position of mascot from others. He was the oldest of his family, save for his father who had let the twenties roar through him in such a fashion as to leave him nearly a corpse already, laid low in a bed much of the time, wracked by coughing fits, shrinking thinner every week as flesh made way for bone. Like a fallen ash leaf he curled at the corners, his shoulders drawn toward some internal vortex, the yellowed skin drying and flaking onto what was left of the piss-stained linens. It was Warren's job at home to bathe his father, to wipe the linens clean and wash them once a week, though they could not afford soap and the washings did little to alleviate a smell that seemed as much a staple to his family's existence as did the bottle of gin that hovered on the night stand, above his father's head where it reflected the thin shafts of light that came through the greasy mica window like a misplaced and fading halo. His mother knitted and prayed the time away.

The switching yard was man's work and Warren grew fast. He took to the work, part an effort to get the much coveted overtime, which had the effect of both bringing money into the home and keeping him out of it. By the time he was sixteen he had shoveled his way from coal loader to joiner's assistant to engineer's assistant, the last a surreptitious appointment by an engineer who lived on Rail Row, a few makeshift doors down from Warren's family, in the finest of a stretch of homes that

ran the span from hovel to modest. He watched the boy grow as they paraded with the workers every morning, across the iron monolith of the Bridge Street bridge, a looming truss that would become an emblem of the New Hampshire mill town during Ian's childhood and later, when Warren was a boy, would be torn down as the burgeoning city choked out its proletariat roots, aimed for a level of gentrification that forsook history, the bridge that connected two sides of a city divided by water, the men that marched its length daily, bound for mills, factories, rail yards.

The engineer, Shelby Blodgett, took to Warren after watching him whip a grown man at the age of fifteen for dumping a shovel-full of coal down the back of his shirt. When Blodgett spoke of the even to him years later, he told him that he saw then that Warren was a man who understood suffering: understood what he must suffer and what he couldn't. They kept a bond that walked the line between friendship and mentorship. Blodgett convinced Warren that there was a world beyond Manchester worth living for, if a man could keep his eyes prized and his spirit sober; Warren convinced Blodgett that his words might be true. They would sit on the hill above Rail Row, the bridge's lines reflecting the moonlight behind them, and watch the carousing in the yard below, the drinking and the fighting. "There are no men down there tonight," Blodgett would say. "Strive to be a man among them." In this way they became reliant upon one another to denounce by example the fear of the other and both held, for the three years they worked in the engineer's cab and viewed their fellow workers from that lofty perch, the tenuous position of the levee against the flood. They began working together at a time when desperate men still strong enough to believe in a better place sought life on the rails, riding in boxcars or

hanging beneath the cars, their spines inches from the rushing tracks; but they worked at a time, too, when men without this fortitude or optimism sought death there.

In 1934, when the nation was suffering and Warren was seventeen, he saw his first death by rail. They were approaching Old Town, Maine, on a short stint. The now unnoticed smell of coal smoke had been subsumed by the paper factory's brutish odor and the thick deciduous forest had thinned as the tracks straightened. Warren had finished shoveling coal and stood beside Blodgett, who worked the controls, drawing back on the throttle only slightly as they rounded the last in a series of sweeping turns. They came into view of Old Town, a few smokestacks rising from tree line like twin towers of worship. Warren heard Blodgett mutter a curse and the man, who was graying now, rubbed the loosening flesh around one eye with his free hand, the other still resting on the throttle as it always did.

"Figure it's time you saw this," Blodgett said, then, with a grimace, "Maybe go shovel more coal."

"See what?" Warren asked, ignoring the conductor's belated reticence. But he had already seen. Sprawled across the tracks, barely distinguishable from the rails, lay the bulk of a man, halfway between the train and the tracks' vanishing point on the town's horizon. Warren's breath went out of him and he had to gasp to say, "Someone's on the tracks." He eyed the brake, but was well-trained and would never reach for it, not if it was his own body on the rails, without Blodgett's order.

"Blow the whistle," Blodgett said, eyes forward.

Warren complied, his arm heavy on the cord. The whistle blasted. The body on the track lay still.

"Can we stop?" Warren asked, but he knew the answer, knew that even if they could they wouldn't, that this was the point. Blodgett barely shook his head as he pushed the throttle forward.

The steady clacking of the pistons and the wheels quickened. Warren eyed the throttle, the scarred hand upon it.

"You've got to make it clean," Blodgett said, his eyes cemented to the darkened mound on the tracks, "It's the most you can do for them."

The train pounded forward, the sound of the steam suddenly a new noise to Warren's ears: a vicious hiss where before there had been only the sound of a great release. Warren looked off to the side, through the smoky side window, where the adjacent woods smeared a dizzy watercolor. He had seen men die before. When he was a boy he watched a man shot on Elm Street, later a butcher threw himself from the roof of the Amoskeag Mill, and after that he saw the strewn remains of a teenager trampled and retrampled by a line of horses driven by a man near blind. Each time he'd received the sight with a blush of fear, a nauseas remove from reality; now he only stared ahead, his position in the cab, the throttle's vicinity, the impotent dangle of the whistle cord stigmas and his position here as executioner not witness.

As they closed in on the body, it rose a face. Heavily bearded with hair over the brow, the face was only a pair of dark eyes, pleading from their resting place upon the steel. The train ran him down without a sound. He was before them and then the train rolled on toward Old town, and if the boxcar panels were splattered with blood, if human offal festooned the tracks behind them, there was not the slightest shudder of the engine to note it.

That night, Warren cleaned his father, his shaking hands scrambling in the linens for some sense of the scene, either the scene on the tracks or the scene he now witnessed, feeling the same mixture of emotion for both of them: complicity and helplessness. That was the first night he drank from his father's bottle of gin, when he had the old man moved to the floor where he could not see. Warren was unsure exactly why he hid his act from his father; there was something in the look he might receive that he feared. Not accusation, but a twinkle of recognition in the vacant eyes, as though they had unexpectedly looked upon an old photo or saw the memory's image of a pivotal event that Warren had known nothing about until now.

Warren worked the engine for another six months and saw two more suicides. Each time he blew the whistle seven times, short bell tolls that indicated nothing to rail workers at first, but became practice as the depression deepened and the lives of the living grew harder, shorter, the lives of the dead mourned with short-lived and tacit acceptance. By the end of the six months, Warren and Blodgett barely spoke, and when they did, Blodgett's tone was condemnatory, noting the smell of whiskey. As buttresses they had failed each other. Both men knew this and when they went their own ways it was without sorrow or even regret; both men also knew that this severing was not uncommon, just another split in a fissured world.

The story of Warren's departure from the rail life was well-known to his son, who had heard it on several occasions, when his father had drunk enough to make him want his son to know the heights his life might have aspired to, had things been different. Nor was the story unknown to the ex-railman's grandson, who kept his same name. Long after Warren's liver failed, after his own skin yellowed and his

eyes sank back into his head, his lineage would recall the man's story, with the usual inconsistencies of telling and memory, for both Ian and Warren the second saw something of themselves in the story, as if, unborn, they had both been passengers on that train, baggage loaded in a boxcar, unable to hear but still a presence, a product of that one small tragedy, as they were of the many that would follow. Each man recalled this story often, when things went wrong, as a kind of curse, a starting point to the persistent troubles of the men of their family, an atavistic malady that both men attributed to this one event, since neither knew of the lives of their ancestors that passed before.

They both recalled this story, in fact and in their own way, as they trudged the dirt road toward home. They were both bloodied now. Blood from a broken nose muddied Ian's beard. He limped faintly, a twitching lip evidence of the effort it took to keep his gate steady. Four men's widths from him, his son walked with his usual short-stepped shuffle, one hand pinched around his baggy pants in lieu of a belt, the other holding a cigarette against one strap of his backpack. They walked in silence, their feet scraping the still moist ground. It was early afternoon and the sun had beaten back the clouds. A warm wind blew through. The forest around them shook with the sound of distant applause. As they walked, each man took turns coughing, Warren from his cigarette's smoke, Ian from hitting the steering wheel, sounding short hacks like Morse Code, their only form of communication. Squirrels broke from the cover of browning ferns and ran along the road ahead of them, chattering their alarm. They passed houses, single-level cabins, their lawns stacked with lumber past its prime. A swing on frayed rope hung from the high branch of a large oak. Ian

walked on the left, facing traffic; Warren walked on the right, with it at his back. No cars passed.

It was a welcome silence to both men after the crash and the fight that followed. Ian came around first to find the shattered window as an answer to a few of the questions that rattled in his head like ice in a glass. He shook his son, who turned to him with a look of disbelief, the same look he'd worn when he lived with Ian and Annie, and later with Ian alone, when Ian would rouse him around noon, a look of disgust, as though Ian had broken some pact that had no repercussion, for it had never been broken before. This unprecedented act was met this time by a clumsy flailing of Warren's hands, an exhausted echo of his earlier thrashing. Ian held a hand up until Warren settled. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Warren blinked three times, trying to pull the world around him into focus. "That's the stupidest fucking question you've ever asked me," he said.

Ian tried the door handle. It flopped back and forth, unable to catch. He pushed the door with a shoulder. A broken spring clacked somewhere beneath them, but the door didn't budge. His breaths came shorter and he struck the door with the palm of his hand. He shifted in his seat so that his back was against the console and kicked at the door, but the door was as solid as the walls of a tomb.

"Christ," Warren said, and opened his own door, which gave with a long, chalky groan. He rounded the front of the car. The hood was bent over a smashed grill. One hull of a tire lay twenty feet from the car, its steel showing from one torn end like tiny teeth. He tried to remember the accident, but couldn't, though in the memory that came, it was he, Warren, who was driving. He knew this was not true,

but that was all the truth he wanted. He seized his father's door handle and pulled. Through a pane of glass that remained unshattered, his father pushed at the inside with his feet. It occurred to Warren that his father could climb out through the open passenger door, but it seemed somehow important that they open the door and so he pulled again. As they worked the door from both sides, the car shook, squeaking, groaning, pushed past the point of budging. They matched rhythms, pushing and pulling, and the front panel bent with the sound of metal on metal, then snapped. Warren fell back on the grass and dirt. Ian crawled out, stood and then leaned back against the car, shook his ankle out.

"You gotta be kidding me," Warren said from the ground.

"It's not a joke." Ian sat in the car seat.

"Was this part of your rescue plan?"

"I guess I forgot who I was rescuing."

"Never knew," Warren said, rolling onto his hands and knees and standing up. His father looked small in the doorway of the crippled Subaru. He turned away.

"Hard to face?" Ian asked. His ankle was throbbing. Not broken, probably sprained, but the pain was enough to shorten his temper.

"I wasn't the one behind the wheel."

"No?"

Warren turned quickly and strode toward his father. Ian reached behind him, feeling for the gun, forgetting he'd stowed it beneath the seat. He was preparing to cover himself, to kick one of Warren's knees out from under him, when Warren

turned sharply, marched around the car and plucked his backpack from the passenger well.

"Wouldn't want to leave without that."

Through the open doorway of the car, Warren pointed a finger at Ian, shook it twice in a scolding gesture, his lips drawn tight and his eyes wide. Then he left for the road. Warren waited a moment, then found the gun where it had slid and lodged itself behind the brake pedal.

It was a half-mile of industrious hobbling before Ian caught up with Warren, who did not turn as his father drafted him. Warren walked with a limp all his own, a hesitant pigeon-toed gate that kept his feet constantly moving inwards, as though each wanted to turn in the direction of the other, giving the appearance more of piston arms than the feet that they were, shod in worn gray sneakers with loose-hanging tongues. Warren's cigarette smoke trailed and deepened Ian's own craving. He wouldn't ask, though; as far as his son knew he was not and had never been a smoker, the former a fact by Ian's reckoning, and the latter but a white lie. The smoke smelled so good that Ian had to skirt the far bank, where its odor was thin. A cigarette, he found himself thinking, and then a drink. This had been a hard day by any standard, and even if the sun hadn't yet risen to the thin band of sky above them, the mark of midday between towering woodland tines, a drink was in order. A stiff drink.

As he neared his son, Ian noticed the hand holding the cigarette missed the ring finger from the second knuckle and it was between this finger and his middle that the cigarette rested. Warren raised his cigarette and lowered it again and Ian slowed, his ankle aching worse without the urgency of speed. Trailing only a few yards he

eyed the finger. The sensation of seeing such a familiar sight disturbed confused him and made him feel faintly dizzy, as though that one finger had taken with it a great deal that he thought he knew about his son and left an appendage unable to exact a proper handshake.

"Your finger," Ian said as he came alongside Warren, "what happened to your finger?"

Warren scowled, held both hands up before him. The mud had worn clean across the palms, leaving dark, marbled crevices. His hands shook, loosing a long ash from the cigarette's nub. "I lost it roofing. Two years ago, remember?" He viewed his father askance, now suspicious as well as angry. How was it possible his own father didn't remember coming home to find him in the bathroom, a sink full of bloodied toilet paper.

"Yeah, yeah. A saw, right?"

"Flashing," Warren spit the words. "I fell of a roof, Ian? Caught the metal flashing and almost lost the other three? You took me to Plymouth and then to Hanover."

It came back to Ian quickly, in the form of the hospital bill, which had hung on the refrigerator for months unpaid. Had he ever paid it? There were so many bills: wreckers and hospitals, rehab, court fees, lawyer's bills. Endless costs, itemized like tattoos on the dark side of his brain.

"That's right. The nurses kept calling me Dad. They didn't bother with my name."

"You just drove me there. It wasn't like I was in critical condition."

"Not that time."

Warren sighed the groan of a man twice his age. "Not now, for Christ's sake. Just don't. I don't think I can handle it."

Ian glanced behind them, in the direction of his mangled car, then forward, where the road straightened its ox-bows. At the end of his line of vision, his driveway branched up and left. They hobbled their respective hobbles up the straightaway's gradual slope, the scraping of their feet loud beneath them and all around them the wind through the trees and the scurrying, the chirping and the rubbing of branches.

When they crested the drive, Ian went straight to the basement door, let himself in, and left Warren standing before the house, catching his breath on the sparse plateau of a driveway. Ian had dragged the felled staircase around the corner and it did not occur to him that it was even missing, and if it had, he would have doubted that Warren would notice the absence; however, he would have been mistaken, for Warren breathed heavy not only from the hill and the cigarettes, but also for the sight of his old home's amputation. Warren took a last, sour drag from his cigarette and stamped it out on his sole, crumbling the tobacco and placing the filter in his pocket, as was his habit. He walked beneath the deck, where the staircase should have been, one hand before him in case it was a trick of the eye. Above him the newly-exposed wood, marred by a saw blade, jutted pale and untouched by weather, a stark contrast to the grayed wood around it. He walked around the deck to where the stairs lay, leaned up against the support beams. Warren squinted at the scene, tried to make sense of it, but his mind still reeled with the events of the last

twenty-four hours. He was coming down now, a familiar though unwelcome feeling, and the stew of his life was approaching an uncomfortable boil. The money, the attack, all the running and sliding, his slut of an ex-girlfriend, and now this with his father, who had obviously gone insane with acts of salvation and carpentry. He couldn't, through this mélange of problems, figure why his father would carve a stairway from the house.

Up the greasy slope strewn with wet leaves, Warren was able to grab a hold on the deck's railing and haul himself up on it, just like he had sneaking back in during a time which was not long ago, but felt it. It was there he found his answer in the crumpled pack of Old Golds. He knew several people who smoked the brand, but only a few who might keep a chainsaw with them, and fewer still who had cause to use it on his father's house. The anger that kept his withdrawal moored fell from him and left him the hum of panic, the guilt he labored, in his way, to avoid. The dread did not rise, any more than the pond down at the base of the driveway rose, but it was plain to him now, and unavoidable, his chronic condition. He wished only that the deck had been built to such a height that a fall might do more than add a break to an already broken body.

"Thinking about jumping?" Ian asked from behind him. He had opened the door silently, after watching his son.

"The stairs," Warren began, but stumbled to his left and nearly went down, catching himself by the corner of the severed railing, the gap at his lilting back. Ian broke from the house and grabbed Warren by the shirt, dragged him from the edge. They swung around like bad dancers or worse boxers, their feet intertwining until

they both held half to the other and half to the rail. Their feet clomped across the deck. They let themselves down on the ground, where they disentangled and sat with their backs to the balisters. Both men breathed through strain.

"What happened to them?" Warren asked.

"They were cut off."

"You don't just cut something like that off."

"Most people don't."

The sliding glass door stood agape before them, a mouth open and voiceless.

"It was Chins, wasn't it?"

"I don't know who it was. I wasn't here." Ian didn't want to talk any more of it. He wanted inside; he had remembered a bottle of Amaretto he and Annie had received for Christmas years back and left in the basement with the other hitherto unnecessary gifts.

"Why did they come here?" Warren asked, more to himself. "I don't live here any more."

"No, you don't." Ian stood and swiped a leaf from his knee, leaving a wet smudge.

Warren seemed to be working things through in his mind, the key's teeth rolling rusted tumblers in the young man's head. "You don't just cut something like that off," he repeated, and turned his face to Ian with a look as close to apology as any Ian had seen on his son's face for longer than he could remember.

Ian forgot about the Amaretto and opened his mouth to explain the situation's complexity, to tell Warren that, yes, he had started this in some ways, but in others

not, and that they were both ensnarled in ways that nobody could have foreseen; but the horror on his son's face, the humanity it reclaimed, was more than Ian could lose then, and so he only offered a hand to help Warren up and tried to ignore the feeling of one finger missing as he righted his son.

ELEVEN

The trailer hung back from the road, barely visible in spring or summer months. Now, with the mounting wind cutting the cover, it presented itself to rogue passerbys as pieces to a jigsaw puzzle, the makeshift deck canted by a sharpening wheel, molting cardboard boxes, an unconnected hot tub, several lawn chairs. People driving the road to Ellsworth would be hard-pressed to noticed the trailer considering the abundance of such roadside scenes. Few drove the road, which was, as a sign just below the trailer's drive noted, not maintained for winter travel. Even in the driest season it was pock-marked with divits and flanked by steep banks that slumped to shallow ditches, steep banks that crumbled to deep ravines, where inconstant streams filtered water from the piney hills that dwarfed them on either side.

On the trailer's porch, two wounded men sat, each one jawing a mouthful of chew and spitting with a *titch* on the deck between their feet, scuffing it with a boot sole into the wood, wood stained a reddish brown. The smell of smoke and mint rose from the stain. If a motorist happened by, he might have imagined the two men returned from a war of some sort, or perhaps the products of some unusual domestic dispute. The fireheaded man on the left wore his arm in a sling of blue tarp and twine, while the other man spit from a lip torn clean to his cheek, with an eyesocket swollen and burst. The eyelid sagged over his whiteless slit of an eyeball. If that weren't enough to make the motorist continue on, the pistols that rested on each man's lap might have made the difference.

They had been sitting there for more than two hours, since Chins dropped Butch at the drive. "Lay low," was all he said before pulling the F-250 back onto the road and heading further into Ellsworth. Butch found the tarp and twine in the shed and secured his arm before entering the trailer. He was in a bad place, his brain amped to the point of seizure, picturing the kid scurrying down the hill. He'd taken some percoce

"Get em?" Rusty asked. His speech was harelipped.

"Soon," Butch responded, and was silent when Rusty said that it looked like he, too, had been gotten. .

Rusty got the guns. Neither man said a word, but walked down the hall to the back door that opened onto the porch. The box of .22 shells went on an upturned crate between them and they sat for hours with only the pop of the guns and their echoes as conversation. They shot at trees and squirrels, paying little attention to the road or the possibility of people on it. After a while, Rusty turned his bloated head and said, "I'll go back out to the place."

Butch shook his head. "He don't want no one out there until he says."

Rusty sucked at his teeth, averted his eyes and spit. "Someone best get out there. If they go back, they won't stick around." He chuckled. Rusty seemed to find the whole situation funny, which was his disposition, but disagreeable to Butchie, who had not smiled in many months and no longer even thought of it as a viable shape for a man's mouth to assume. So stolid was his stance that earlier, when he'd jammed his shoulder back into its socket against the side panel of Chins's truck, he

refused even to grimace, only squinted his eyes slightly as though the pain were some bright light and he was deciding whether or not to walk to it

Butch spotted a cat creeping up the bank before them, a calico cat with a bobbed tail, more curious than afraid of the gunshots.

"They take off from there it's stones in a stream. Might well leave town. Probably head down to Portsmouth with the rest of the dick niggers."

It was a phrase Rusty had coined months earlier, before Shelby died, and Butch had found it hilarious at the time, though repeated use had worn it thin and he no longer responded in any visible way. Instead he took aim at the cat, which, sensing the man's intent, stepped behind a birch tree so that only the tip of his head and the stubby tail were visible like dark knots.

"I don't need permission," Rusty said to the spit stain at his feet. "This is your call, by my book. You say you want to take care of your own, I'll fire the truck up right now."

Rusty started to say something more, but the gun's report silenced him. The corner of the birch tree exploded a burst of splinters from the tree's shade. There was the sound of birds and then the cat cried out a short howl as it spun from its cover and landed in the leaves, writhing and pawing without purpose. Low, vaguely human noises were being drawn from it.

"Sumbitch," Rusty said. He put his gun down on the crate beside the ammo. He tromped down the steps and went to the cat. Butch stayed seated. Rusty tried to pick the cat up from the ground but the cat hissed and Rusty jumped back. "Shit!" he hollered back up to Butch, who watched the scene without expression. "Blew off his

face!" Rusty knelt down and snatched at the writhing cat, bringing him up by the scruff of the neck. The cat's head lolled and the groan continued, the legs twitching in time.

"Toss it in the road," Butch hollered.

Rusty took a moment to investigate the genitals, then said, "He's not dead."

"Matter of time."

But Rusty climbed the porch steps instead, holding the cat out before him lantern like. He set it on the top step where it continued its listless twisting. Sure enough, the better part of the cat's face was missing, replaced by a gory smear, a knot of torn flesh and bone where the eyes had been and the top of the mouth shattered back to a few teeth that peered from the wreck. Butch chambered another bullet, sat forward in his chair and took aim at the back of the cat's skull. The cat startled him with a yowl before bolting across the yard. Butch trained his gun and fired a round. A mine of dirt detonated behind the cat, which then turned and ran straight into a bush, backed out and tried again to the left, where it wormed into the underbrush.

Rusty sat in his chair, put a hand on the grip of his gun, but left it resting. Butch watched the road and when the cat appeared he took aim, but couldn't make his mark. If only I'd had that good a shot earlier, he thought, it would have been worth the wasted bullet just to try. The cat was gone now, too, padding its way up the dirt road, veering from bank to bank like an animal gone rabid. He couldn't get anything right today, and while the cat would bleed out in the woods before dark, he suspected his other targets were heartier.

They were working on the smokehouse when Chief Hurt pulled into the drive in his '84 Buick Cabriolet with the blue dome light. They had been prepping in anticipation of Chins' slaughter. Rusty hunched over the fity-gallon drum, shoveling it clean of ash, while Butch scoured the meat hooks with Brillo pads inside the old outhouse. He had taken to obsessing over menial chores since Lester's death. Labor did not distract his mind so much as it gave his trembling body a mission other than knotting itself. No amount of work could stop slideshow of images, even pause them. His son's face in his eighth grade school photo. The boy as a young man, dressed in a sweat-wetted t-shirt with the name of his tree service company, Hinkson's Cutting, emblazoned across the back, bending low over a chainsaw, his arm primed over the cord. Finally, the charred Cavalier, wedged between busted guardrails. Sometimes the closed casket appeared before him, too, and when he thought of the closed lid his hands trembled, and whatever the task at hand might be, he had to pause and wait for the tremor to pass. He was waiting out such a tremor when Rusty opened the door and said in a hushed voice, "Chief Hurt's here."

The met hook hung trembling in Butch's hand. He gestured Rusty inside. The bright light outside pinstriped them through the cracks, glinting from Butch's bright hair. Rusty rubbed a hand against his good eye. "Think this is about the kid?" he asked.

Butch pushed the outhouse door open a crack with the bow of the hook. Chief Hurt had set his hat and was approaching the trailer door. "He didn't see you?" Butch asked Rusty.

"Sumbitch's half blind anyways. This for the kid?"

Butch suspected it was so. He had, after all, spent the morning chasing the little bastard through a fairly populated area, kicking in motel doors, while Rusty had vandalized the house, and probably put a good hurt on the older Waters. But then he saw in the Buick, behind the sky's reflection, the face of Rusty's neighbor, Owen Leonard, who had built a trophy home two summers ago, a quarter mile from the trailer. Butch recognized the well-kempt beard, the averted stare. He appeared to be holding something that he petted. Lay low, was all Chins had said.

Butch eased the door closed. "You take this one, Rusty. I got business. You got to take this one."

"Take it?"

"I'll do the talking, but if one of us has got to get in the back of that cruiser, it's got to be you." Butch spoke the words with a solemn factuality.

"Bullshit I got to." Rusty raised his voice.

Butch held the meat hook up, pressed the point to the center button of Rusty's shirt and backed him the two steps to the back wall. The frame shuddered. It was during these brief moments, as his anger mounted and prophesied violence, that he was pardoned of his son's memory. The wrought anticipation consumed him and he was loathe to escape its hold, which made taking a step back impossible. At this point, if he was served the least insult real or imagined, the next step was less an assault for him than a retreat, a sidestep to avoid the rush of the formless mass of sorrow and rage that swarmed him like a perpetual cloud of locusts. His eyes showed no such recession, however; nor did they promise mercy. "You said you wanted to help," he said with a final push of the hook, then turned from his cousin and

shouldered through the smokehouse door and into the afternoon light, the wooden door flapping behind him.

Chief Hurt's knuckles had sounded the last of three pops against the aluminum door as Butch stepped up behind him and said, "Looking for someone, Will?"

Hurt turned. His hat brim shaded his face from the high sun, save for the goateed chin, seasoned with gray hairs. Despite the shade, he squinted, as if seeing something unfamiliar, though Butch knew this was not the case. It was part show, Will acting the part of concerned police chief, and part glaucoma.

"Rusty around?" he asked, and then noted Rusty standing a few yards behind Butch, nodded. "Who ran you through the thresher?" he asked as Rusty neared.

"He took a hoof up at Chins' a few back," Butch answered. "Ain't been himself since. You know how it is."

"Yeah? He seen a doctor?"

"He don't need a doctor to tell him he ain't right. Swelling will drop soon enough."

"Any permanent damage?"

"Hard telling not knowing. More wood on the fire, likely." Butch had looped the meat hook behind him, through one suspender strap, and it hung there, the handle brushing his tailbone as he shifted his weight.

"Heard some shots up here a while back," Hurt said, popping his knuckles one at a time, more habit than display.

They were good hands, Butch noted. He'd seen the chief take down more than a few young men with his badge on and off. He fought often and he fought fair, which Butch appreciated, though he had also watched the man take a whipping the spring prior from a lumberjack who could have been put out with a well-timed sodfoot. Fighting fair was admirable, Butch conceded, but fighting itself was stupid and, given that, Butch had always figured any man doing it might as well do it to win. "You hear them, or was it the boy you got riding shotgun?" he asked.

"He's got a cat that's missing the better part of his face. Anything to say on that?"

Rusty had come alongside Butch and swiveled his swollen mug from one man to the other like a child feigning participation by presence alone. The gully wind broke a knot of leaves against their boots.

"We knocked off a few rounds. I thought I heard some commotion after one of Rusty's shots. But shit, a cat, huh?" He turned to Rusty with a pitiful look. "That's just awful, Will. You know how Rusty feels about animals."

Rusty nodded in earnest, for it was true, and all the men knew it, that Rusty cared very little for much, but would swerve into an elm to avoid a stray dog. "Did he make it home?" he asked. Butch shot him a disapproving glance.

"I'm going to have to put him down, but his owner," he nodded toward the Cabriolet, "wanted you for witnesses." Hurt went to the cruiser, opened the door, said something to Leonard in a soft, placating tone, and removed the cat, holding it with both hands at arm's length. The cat had slipped into shock. It's legs hung loose as those of a marionette and folded like batter when Hurt laid the animal down in the

leaves. Rusty stepped forward and Butch could hear his quick breaths. Butch reminded himself that Rusty was his brother's wife's family, not blood to him. He failed in the tests of fire; he was swollen with softness; he was weak in a way that would have embarrassed Butch if Rusty had come to be family by any route other than marriage.

Hurt left the cat and retrieved his shotgun, reached over Leonard and pulled it from its station between the seats. Leonard stared at his pet on the ground. No tears marked his face, though his eyes were red and refused to meet Butch's or even light upon Rusty. Hurt sauntered back to the cat, his back to the man in the car.

"Anyone got anything to say?" he asked, thumbing a shell into the chamber, blinking.

"Never knew the man," Butch said, suddenly unable to help himself. Something about Leonard's stooped head, his defeated eyes, even his in-laws shaky breaths, made the whole scene as juvenile as an elementary school play. Leonard raised his face, glowered.

"You can't just do whatever the hell you want," he said. "Glitz is a family pet."

"Was," Butch replied. "Was also on Rusty's property."

Leonard climbed out of the car, but stood close to the empty doorway. He was tall, but sapling thin with shoulders unencumbered by a man's weight. "Are you talking to me about the law?" he asked.

Hurt raised his hands, one to either man, the shotgun straight between him and Butch. "Enough, now. If the law needs tending to, I'll be the one to do it. Let's put

all this aside and take care of," he paused, "Glitz, before he has to suffer any more." With that he lowered the barrel, his left hand swinging to cradle the lever loosely, and fired without warning, causing two of the three onlookers to jump. The barrel flashed and sod sprayed and when the gun smoke dissipated in the wind and the dirt had returned to the earth, no cat remained.

"Christ, Will," Butch said, checking himself for bloodsplatter but finding nothing.

Hurt knelt and patted the ground where the cat had lain. "Straight to the next world," he said, but then a plaintive mewing protested from beneath the Buick's front end. Each man said, "No," at almost the same time, some with fear, one with disappointment, one with bemused disbelief. Hurt reached beneath his car and hauled the cat out by its nub of a tail, the rest of it following, a kimmying mass of fur still in the same shape it had been before the shotgun blast. Leonard let out a whimper.

"Kevlar calico," Butch said, a hint of respect for his former prey seeping into his voice. He leaned back to a dumbstruck Rusty. "You said he was half-blind, didn't tell me it was the point-blank half." He almost smiled, then called to Hurt, "Third time's the charm?"

Hurt lifted the cat, cradling it this time. "I think old Glitz has paid his dues," he said; then to Leonard, "I'll take the both of you down to the vet's."

Leonard began to protest, insisting that they put the cat out of its misery, but Hurt only turned the stock to the thin man and said, "Your cat, Mr. Leonard."

"Someone's paying for this," Leonard said.

Hurt pushed his tongue around in his mouth and nodded. "Rusty, why don't you hop in back, come along for the ride until we can get this cleaned up."

Rusty looked to Butch, who returned a cool, green stare from beneath red brows, as if to say that he hoped Rusty had been listening to the story he'd given Hurt, that he hoped with his one good eye, Rusty had paid close attention.

The Cabriolet's dome light disappeared down the driveway's slope, and Butch returned to the smokehouse, removed the hook from his back and finished cleaning it, the shaking settled now, enough violence seen now to calm his visions and his hands.

TWELVE

Ian quickly composed a meal for the two of them, utilizing what little foodstuffs remained, while Warren paced from deck to living room, down the long hall to Ian's room, where he could keep watch over the driveway. Both men moved with contained frenetic energy and both felt relief when the meal was finished, the plans made and supplies packed. Warren was skeptical that his mother would take them in, and was more hesitant to leave on foot, despite Ian's assurances that the distance to the highway was, if they climbed straight over the hills, no more than a day's hike and that from there it was but an hour long hitch hike to Manchester. Neither of them relished the idea of sleeping in the woods that night, but agreed that to stay in the house was risky and that it was heads or tails which sleeping arrangement would yield better rest.

The backpacks they carried were heavily loaded, and they struggled up the sparse switchback trail that rose above the house. "Are we still on the trail," Warren would ask, and Ian would answer yes. "See the break in the branches ahead?" he would say, or else note the places on rocks where the moss was thin, newly-grown, lessons Warren received silently, still guilt-ridden enough from the sight of his father's cut home to play the part of pupil. While at the house and under the same influence of guilt, Warren had opened his leather case and hurled his needle and spoon deep into the darkening woods, where they landed invisible and without a sound. He kept the remainder of his pills, knowing that the coming days would require some relief and fearing the thought of the woods at night pressing in on him in

such a state as withdrawl. As they mounted the crest of the first hillock, Warren ate a few codeine, scraping his tongue against the sharp of his eyeteeth to clear his mouth of the brutish taste. The faraway smell of smoke faintly scented the air and at the crest they could see, across the wooded valley, the dark plumes ribboning from the far side of Rattlesnake Mountain and heard, occasionally, the fire trucks' sirens, stewed by echo into a constant drone.

They dropped into a shallow mountaintop wash, where the dirt turned to fine sand. Late afternoon light came horizontal and golden and striped the wash with anorexic birch shadows. They walked east along the draw, their feet eased by the sand, weaving through the gleaming trees. The last of the tiny, bifurcated leaves trembled above them, reflecting the light in a manner that made both men feel oddly nearsighted. The wash led to an overhanging rock wall, lichen specked and veined with quartz and mica. "Good a place as any," Ian said, and shrugged his pack onto a low ledge. He stretched and windmilled his arms, evicting the tension in his shoulders and chest. It had been a short hike, he knew, and more would be demanded of them the next day. Warren slumped beneath the overhang, leaving his pack on, leaning back against it. After a while he unbuckled the waiststrap. Ian set to preparing a fire, watching his son with onecornered glances, wondering all the while how much Warren was still using, and when it would run out, and what the repercussions would be for the both of them. It was obvious he was still high by the vacant eyes, the slouched shoulders. The signs were subtle, but Ian had learned them unconsciously over years of suspicious observation; though it had been a while since

he'd seen his son, the aptitude and tendency for judgment both returned with the ease of making love to an estranged woman.

Once the fire burned, a bright tee-pee mirrored by the auburn glow from the adjacent forest fires, Ian sat and watched the night creep. Warren took the headlamp and foraged for firewood, returning with arms full. He dropped them beside Ian and sat on the other side so they could both use the stack as an armrest that lowered as the sky darkened and the fire demanded more fuel. While he hunted wood, Warren had eaten half an Oxycontin. It fed his urge for conversation, loosening the guilt and allowing him to speak openly, as if to a stranger whom he might never see again. He began telling his father about a friend of his who'd been arrested for stealing shingles off a roof but soon segwayed into a story of his time at the county farm.

The county farm was aptly named, for it was a running farm with over one hundred head of stock, all of which were stabled in a barn so large that it dwarfed the housing unit. The jail itself was a low-level cement structure marked only with water runoff and a rare window. Inside, a broad hall that served as exercise room, mess hall and lounge was ringed with cells. The cells remained open most of the day and the residents, as they were called, were free to roam the contained space as long as behavior was good. And it was for the most part. The inmates all served sentences of less than a year, most for DUI, petty theft. The rare assault case marked the hardest of the population and one of those, a Massachusetts émigré charged with hitting a bouncer with a baseball bat, celled with Warren. They had said little to each other for the first weeks after Warren's arrival, but had slowly opened communication, lines greased by pruno and tobacco rolled in toilet paper. The man's name was Clarence

and he made his reputation by jumping two men, boys really, who supplied the jail population with acid, and taking over their racket. Warren was petrified of the idea of tripping inside and told Clarence so. Clarence was the darkest-skinned man in county, the color of acorns, and he flashed a bright smile at Warren, and said, "That's good. Way I won't have to watch your ass." Warren was unsure what that meant exactly, but found out a few weeks later.

It was his work day, and Warren had risen early, at the first buzzer's call. His barn shift started at five and he had half an hour to ready, most of which he spent standing outside the barn, smoking with the other men in the dim morning light. This morning he woke to find Clarence seated on the metal toilet, his chin cradled in his hands. As Warren sat up in bed he saw that Clarence was watching him, his bright eyes wide and perilous, an expression that spoke of the peddler buying his own wares.

"You been taking a lot of liberties," Clarence said before Warren could even swing his legs off the bunk, "And I been thinking about killing you."

"No need," Warren said, his body suddenly awake and vibrating. "Next guy they send in will be two times the dick."

He meant the comment to bring levity, but Clarence only leaned forward and cocked his head, then palmed his knees as if preparing to stand. Warren shifted to the foot of his bunk and slowly reached to swing the cell door open. It squealed and echoed in the hall, where there was little noise save for the few rustling morning shifters. He pulled himself standing by an iron bar, shuffled to the doorway and backed out. "I'll see you later, man," he said before hurrying outside. "Get some

rest. Use my bunk if you want." Clarence only stared at him with the eyes of a man without purpose to live or to lose.

It was a day of action. Warren's nerves had not yet calmed from his wake-up call when Buster, a portly guard who smelled of detergent and sweat, informed the morning crew that the cows had gotten loose the night before and now roamed freely in the acreage between the jail's fence and the river that separated them from Vermont. "One of you peckerwoods must not have figured the fine art of gate closing," he said, his anger forced and disingenuous. "Now it's corral time. You know your drill, you know your places. I want them number to number and udder to udder by the time the sun lights that weathervane."

The men went to work with the sluggish motions of zombies, smoking as they formed a large circle, each man five yards from the next, and marched forward, the circle tightening around the loosed herd grazing down the grassy slope, on the flatland by the river. Buster went to the bank, at the rear of the herd and fired a single rifle shot. The inmates stood guarded, their weight resting at their heels. The herd almost always moved slowly, recognizing the gun as more an instruction than a threat, but the rare spook had cost one man his life two years earlier and the story of a six-monther in for failure to pay alimony, trampled to a closed-casket funeral, was a staple of dinnertime lore. This time the cows moved as they were expected to. The inmates had only to stand their ground, blocking the cattle's potential paths, until each lumbering beast was returned to its numbered pen. Warren often wondered if the cow's ability to find his particular place in the stable was evidence of some

unrecognized or under appreciated intelligence, or simply a dumb homing instinct borne of the repetition of a life without opportunity.

With the herd corralled, the men milked and shoveled and bailed without supervision. The fence behind the bar was lockless and it had become routine for one of the repeat offenders, Larry, who had a beard as long as his rap sheet of victimless offenses, received his ex-wife as an unofficial visitor. Warren milked to the rhythm of the woman's moans from the loft above and when she left, she left behind a dozen steaks that Larry grilled up on a contraband Weber he kept stashed behind the bailing machines. He offered the steaks free of charge on a rotating basis, buying his colleagues silence on the issue of his stealthy conjugal visits. He usually wheeled the grill around the backside of the barn, but that day Buster had been hobbling an rare patrol and so Larry grilled the steaks at the back of the barn, where a high diamond-shaped window vented the smoke.

"You're going to burn this place," one man said.

"You want a fucking steak or not," was Larry's reply.

It didn't take a crystal ball to predict the obvious, and they'd not returned from their shift for more than half an hour when the men were roused from their post-work routine by the fire siren's long moan. Warren had been keeping his distance from Clarence, who lurked around the free weights, his eyes still wide, set bright in his dark face. He wore a tattoo on his forearm of a dagger bannered by the words, "Hope is time you waste," and he picked at the tattoo as if a scab. When the alarm horn sounded, Warren only looked in the direction of the barn and shook his head. The population crowded the windows at the far end of the hall, suddenly boyish and

eager to see something so extraordinary as open flame. Warren took the opportunity to use the payphone, which was never open at this time. He stood alone at that end of the hall. He dialed Connie and after she accepted the charges, told her of his strange day with the same tone he might have after returning home from an eventful day at the office.

"That sucks," she said.

"It's kind of funny, don't you think?"

"I suppose."

"It's starting to smell like a barbecue in here."

Connie made a noise like clearing an errant hair from her throat, then sighed. When Warren asked her what was the matter, she told him that nothing was the matter, but that it was saddening her to hear his story, and Warren realized that it was the first event he had related since his first days in there, when their conversations were still hushed, urgent, like pleas. "I'll be out soon," he said, which was his usual good-bye.

"I'll be right here." Her usual reply, bled of its sincerity.

When he hung up he went back to his cell and sat brooding, his lips and teeth tight. The hall filled with smoke, the stench of burning flesh heavy and acrid. All his muscles wrenched with the sound of the barn roof collapsing, the hiss of sparks and the roar of the population cheering the fall of any part of their cage.

When all had settled, Clarence returned. He hovered in the doorway, his wiry frame like another bar, silhouetted by the hall's fluorescence. Warren said nothing, only stood and threw a clumsy punch at the man, received his beating with bestial

grunts. He came to in the infirmary. Buster lay on a bench across from him, peering from beneath a meaty forearm.

"Took a few, eh?" Buster asked.

"How's the other guy look?" Warren asked, wincing at the sting of a split lip.

"Looks like he's on his way to State. We been looking for an opportunity. He'll be in solitary until the transfer order comes through."

Warren was suddenly envious of his attacker, the thought of solitary comforting. His head throbbed. His lip stung. A loosed tooth joined the cacophony of aches. He asked Buster to turn down the lights and the guard did, then lay back down on the bench and both men lay in the dim light that shone through the wired infirmary window.

Ian listened to his son's story, moving only to blink. The pile of firewood between them was low now, and his fingertips rested on the sand where they raked distracted half-circles. Warren told his tale with relaxed energy, the ember of his cigarette tip waving in the firelight. At first Ian had focused so intently on the act of listening, the nods and murmurs of affirmation, that he'd been unable to actually hear what his son said, but soon the story took him over and by the time it had finished he was dumbstruck and his earlier concern for his response following the telling was vanquished and he said only, "Goddamn," so quietly that it was nearly lost beneath the dying fire's crackle.

"Where is Connie now?" he asked, but Warren offered no answer but a curl of his lip and a low mutter of vague condemnation. The quid pro quo impetus was upon Ian now, or so he felt. So detailed was Warren's story, so honest, that it brought to

Ian's mind the stories he'd enjoyed in college. He'd majored in Business Marketing, but took a minor in English, which had been more his passion, though his father refused college payment for what he considered a hobby. A fine hobby, but hobby nonetheless. He thought back to his reckless days, trying to find a comparable yarn, but found that the memories lacked clarity, precision. Even the series of events seemed scrambled now, and rearranged themselves in his hasty recollection as a Frankenstein of drinking, driving out the back roads from Manchester, drunken maulings in the bed of his pick-up, memories non-descript and not worth the telling.

Then Warren offered a subject, one whose details were fresh and awful as a dog bite. "Why are you out here?" he asked.

Now the story unfurled in Ian's mind: the encounter with Chins, Rusty's limp body loaded into the truck bed, the searching, and the trepidation, which he could not attribute to any of these events, for it seemed a chronic disease, developed back in a time he could no longer, as his recent attempts proved, remember.

"Somebody needs to watch your ass," was what he said, and he did so with an unreturned grin.

"What about the restaurant?"

"I closed it yesterday."

"Closed it why?"

The fire was nearly out now, only a pale orange circle stamped in the earth before them like a youthful reflection of the moon. Blue light fell on the mens' knees and feet. The rock overhang shadowed them and made the birch stand glow by comparison, it's leaves shimmering even in the dark, trembling beneath a constant

wind. As Ian turned towards his son, the moon glinted from a patch of mica over Warren's head.

"The liquor commission shut me down. More or less."

"Because of Lester?"

"Partly, I suppose."

A coydog bayed somewhere across the hill, a throaty warble of an alarm.

"What happened that night?"

"With Lester? Beats me. He drank too much, piled into the guardrails down towards the intervale. He's not the first."

"He was my friend, you know."

Ian raised his eyebrows as if to say, some friend, but Warren was looking away, across the valley to the forest fire's amber glow on the adjacent mountain's far side, the promise of a sun returning from the west, unhappy with its recent setting.

"He was my friend and I don't know many people get drunk enough to crash within a quarter mile of the bar."

"I should've cut him off, I know. I've paid for that."

"Some people say – "

"To hell with those people. A bunch of wife beaters and alcoholics, hillbreeders."

Warren disentangled a stick from the pile, crawled out into the moonlight, stirred the throbbing embers.

"Why do you hate them so much? They never did anything to you."

Ian found it hard to believe that Warren could even utter such an obtuse statement. Didn't he see the damage they had done? Wasn't it they who started him on drugs, drove the family business to ruin, and now pursued them like mongrel beasts unleashed?

"I have no use for people who refuse to make their lives any better," he said.

The tip of Warren's stick flared, and he held the flame up before his face, studied it with a blank gaze and said, "None?"

Ian slept that night spooned by the curve of the rock face, with Warren curled before him, a distance the width of a fist between them. Their packs served as pillows and a sleeping bag, the only one Ian had been able to find, swaddled them. They hadn't bothered to rekindle the fire and it offered not even the faintest scent of smoke. The moon had dropped behind the fires of Rattlesnake and the darkness shocked Ian as he startled awake, his already uneasy sleep truncated by the rustling of some stealthy approach.

He pulled the sleeping bag from his shoulders and rose on an elbow. The sound of his own pulse argued with his straining ears, but he heard it again, a scratching like the tines of a rake against coarse earth. He felt a tremor go through him, but as his eyes adjusted he saw it was Warren's shivering, punctuated by quick spasmic jerks, mired in some awful dream.

Even in the near absence of light, the yellow glow of canine eyes shone. A ragged coydog, its head lowered, emerged from the thicket and loped the perimeter of their makeshift campsite. Its breath came in quick pants. Its feet padded softly on the